

Takehaya
Illust: Poco

34

INVADERS OF THE ROKUTOU MA!?



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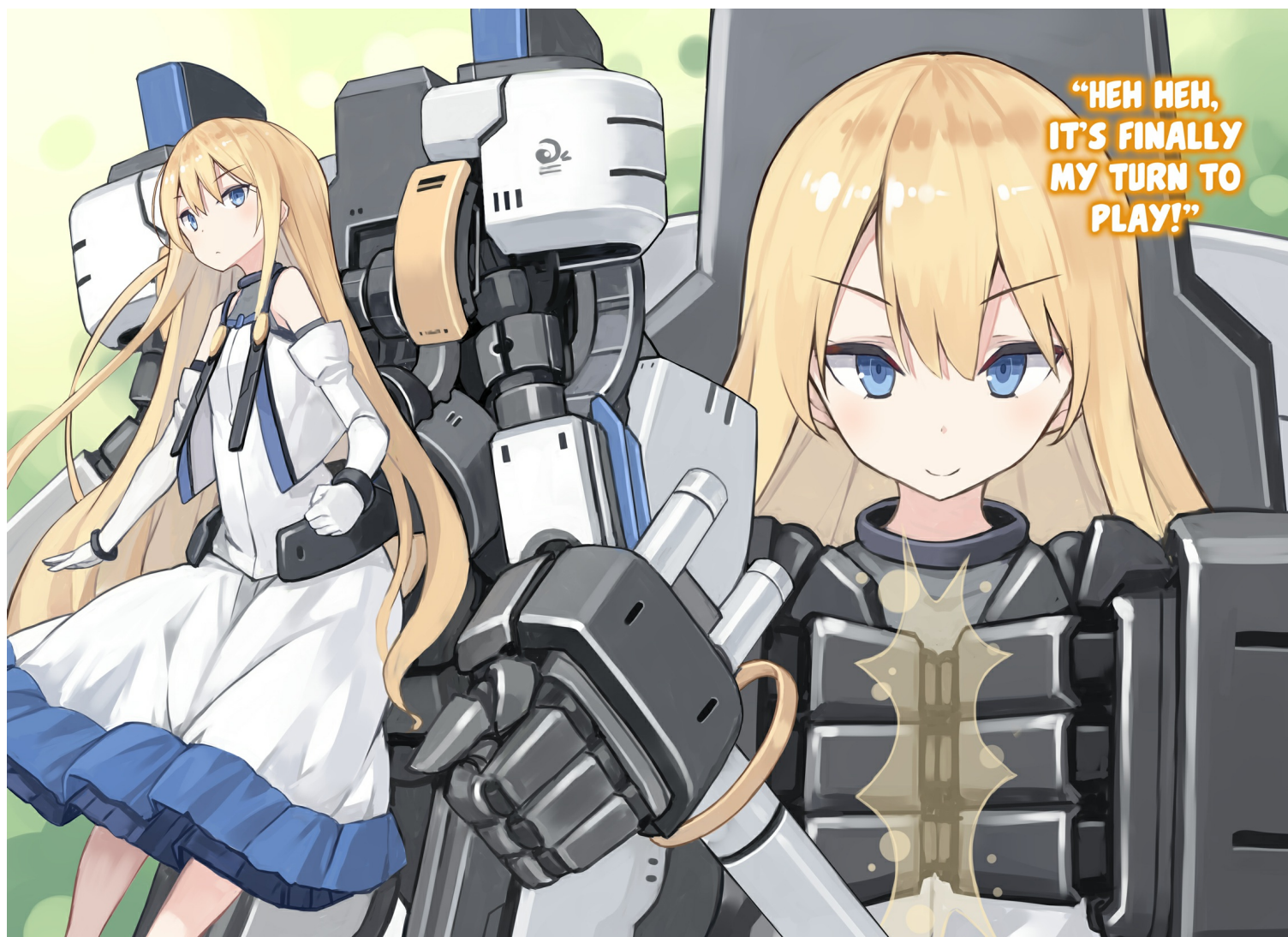


A blue-haired anime girl with short, layered hair and large blue eyes. She is wearing a white short-sleeved button-down shirt with a small blue paw print on the collar, tucked into a light blue pleated skirt with a black belt. She has a surprised expression with a small open mouth and a hand raised near her face. The background consists of vertical wooden panels.

**ON A
SHOPPING
DATE WITH
MASTER?!**

**“RUTH-SAN,
THAT’S NOT
WHAT YOU
USUALLY WEAR,
IS IT? IT...
LOOKS GOOD
ON YOU.”**

**“R-
REALLY?”**



“HEH HEH,
IT’S FINALLY
MY TURN TO
PLAY!”

**A NEW
THREAT
LURKS
IN THE
SHADOWS!**



TABLE OF CONTENTS

Friday, May 27th

Creeping Darkness

Sunday, May 29th

Sunday With a Cat and Ruth

Sunday, May 29th

Unexpected Attack

Monday, May 30th

Everyone's Intentions

Monday, May 30th

Kasumi Raiga

Monday, May 30th

Follow the Sparks

Wednesday, June 8th

The Offensive at the Kasumi Estate

Afterword

FACTIONS MAP

KASAGI SHIZUKA

Koutarou's classmate and the landlord of Corona House. Alunaya the Fire Dragon Emperor resides within her.



KURANO KIRIHA

Heiress of the underground who's finally found her beloved. With her quick wits and big heart, she's a master of both tactics and love.



UNDERGROUND DWELLERS (OF THE PEOPLE OF THE EARTH)

SATOMI KOUTAROU

Our protagonist, and the formal tenant of room 106. Also the Blue Knight.



MATSUDAIRA KOTORI

Kenji's little sister, but you'd never know it. An introvert through and through. She's now enrolled at Harukaze High.



MATSUDAIRA KENJI

Koutarou's best friend-cum-partner in crime. He can be a bit tasteless, but he's a good guy at heart.



KOUTAROU'S CHILDHOOD FRIENDS



AIKA MAKI

A former member of the evil magical girl group, Darkness Rainbow. After bonding with Koutarou, she's now a loyal member of the Satomi band of knights.

MAGICAL GIRLS (OF THE MAGICAL KINGDOM OF FOLSARIA)

NIJINO YURIKA

The Magical Girl of Love and Courage, Rainbow Yurika. She's a walking disaster, but she's grown into a magical girl who really makes it count when she needs to.



RESIDENTS OF CORONA HOUSE



GHOST FORM



HIGASHIHONGAN SANAE

The ghostly girl that used to haunt Koutarou. She now has her body back, however, and is more energetic than ever before.

GHOSTS



RUTHKANIA NYE PARDOMSHIHA

Theia's retainer and assistant. She's extremely happy to be able to serve the master she so admires.



THEIAMILLIS GRE FORTHORTHE

Princess of Forthorthe and the Blue Knight's liege. She's blossomed into a wonderful leader, but she's still quick to pick a fight.



CLARIOSSA DAORA FORTHORTHE

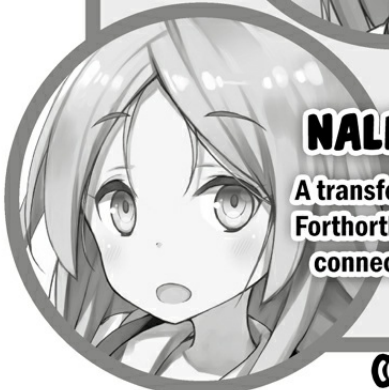
Koutarou's partner during his adventures in past Forthorthe. She's still growing, both as a princess and as a scientist.

PRINCESS ALAIA



SAKURABA HARUMI

The reincarnation of Princess Alaia, whose soul travelled two thousand years through time to be with her special someone. She's currently happy to be living a normal life alongside him.



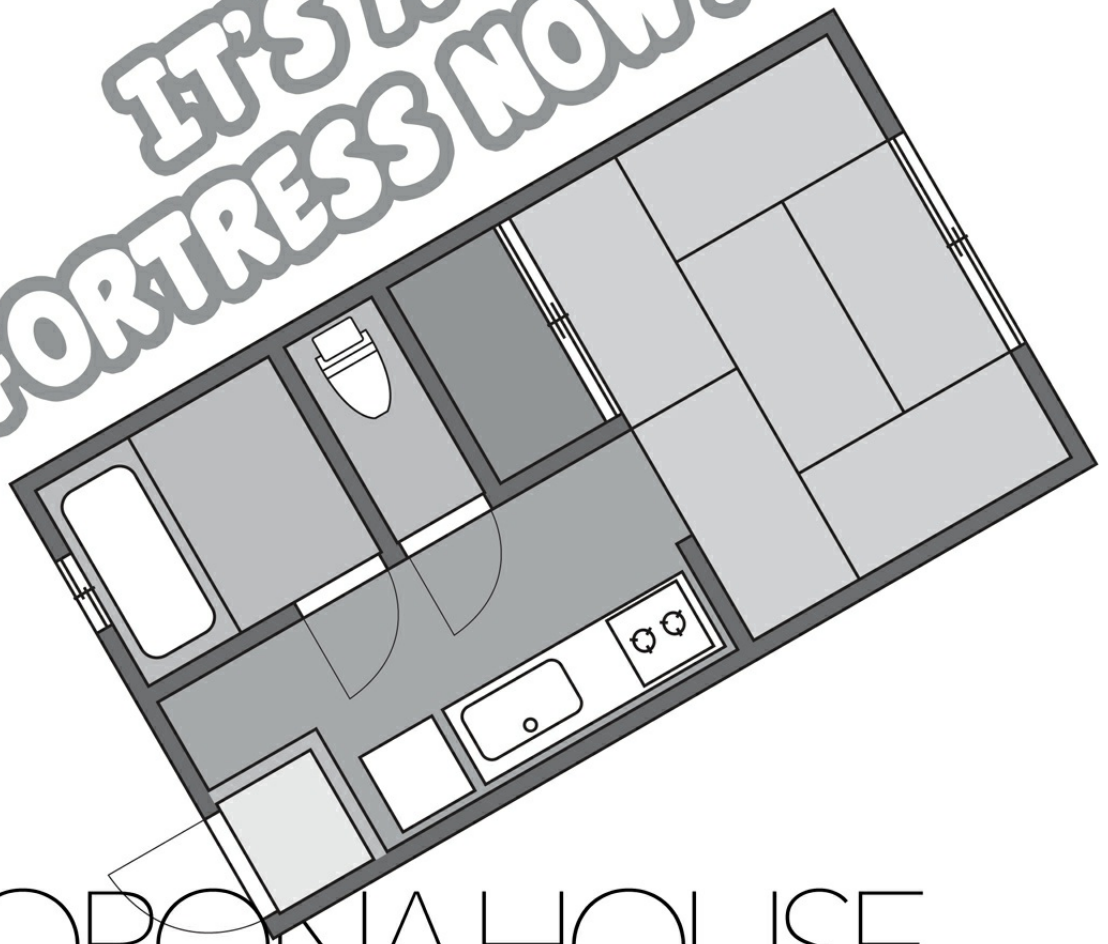
NALFA LAREN

A transfer student who's officially come from Forthorthe, but it seems she shares a special connection with Koutarou and company...

ALIENS

(OF THE HOLY FORTHORTHE GALACTIC EMPIRE)

IT'S A
FORTRESS NOW?!



CORONA HOUSE
ROOM 106

Creeping Darkness

Friday, May 27th

As part of his war arsenal for the coup in Forthorthe, Vandarion created a gigantic mechanical dragon that combined cutting-edge Forthorthian technology, underground spiritual energy technology, and Folsarian magic. Vandarion wasn't entirely aware of this, however. He was under the impression that the spiritual energy and magic components were simply the latest and greatest from DKI. Even when he kidnapped Green, who used divination magic to control the dragon, he'd merely believed that Elexis had discovered an individual with an extraordinary capacity for operating the technology.

Vandarion and his men had no idea that the true technology behind their latest weapons had come from spiritual energy and magic, and that lack of understanding was partially responsible for their ultimate defeat.

"In the end, my uncle underestimated our enemy. He never saw the bigger picture."

"Be it in war or trade, you have no chance of coming out on top if you fail to understand the full extent of your situation."

"That's right. It was only inevitable that my uncle lost, though it was through no fault of his own."

Ralgwin, Vandarion's nephew, felt Vandarion's defeat was a matter of course. After all, who could have known the true nature of the "new technologies" DKI had supplied? Forthorthian science was already producing machines capable of boggling the mind, and people—soldiers and civilians alike—used such technology in their everyday lives. Barriers and warp drives might as well be magic to the average Forthorthian citizen.

In this light, it was only natural that Vandarion didn't think to question the strange powers of his foes. That wasn't a lack of insight on his part; *no one* would have thought to account for such anomalies in their machinations.

Vandarion had had his suspicions, however. That much was evident when he stationed Ralgwin on Earth. Vandarion thought there was something strange about Koutarou and company's strength, but he never saw a need to launch a full-scale investigation into the matter. It was far more reasonable to assume that the stories about them were exaggerated—mere propaganda.

“But you're exceptionally amazing for realizing what he failed to, Lord Ralgwin. Like that spiritual energy cloaking device that's been collecting dust in our warehouse.”

“After witnessing my uncle's demise, anyone would have realized it. It was an expensive lesson.”

Ralgwin, who remained behind on Earth, had long been convinced that Koutarou's power was more than it appeared to be. Something fantastical, even. Something that completely defied common sense. He knew how ridiculous the theory sounded, but as far as he was concerned, there was no doubt about it. Vandarion's downfall had proven it. Thus Ralgwin was overcome with a dark joy when he finally had concrete evidence in his hands...

Said evidence was a piece of spiritual energy technology brought to him by an Earthling. In return, Ralgwin had supplied a certain Forthorthian technology. It was both a sign of his thanks, as well as a means to establish a foothold with the lead he'd just acquired. The former was exceptionally rare for Ralgwin, making it all the more clear just how important this was to him.

“Is the technology you've given us another test, Lord Ralgwin?”

“In part. But it is also a token of my gratitude. This is a valuable opportunity for both of us.”

“As for said technology... according to our analysis, it is indeed possible for us to replicate it with the resources available to us.”

“I'm pleased to hear that. It means we'll be able to procure the structural material we need as well. However...”

“I know. We'll go with the beta formula over the alpha.”

Ralgwin had shared the secrets of basic Forthorthian metallurgy. The metals used on Earth were far inferior to their theoretical strength because of

impurities left over from the refining process. These impurities made the metal weaker under stress, leading to decreased performance and even fractures—something that wasn't an issue with Forthorthian methods.

As it turned out, Earth was presently capable of replicating Forthorthian metallurgy in two ways: the alpha formula and the beta formula. The former was superior and could create the strongest known metals in the universe, but the latter was still capable of producing metal far stronger than anything currently available on Earth. For the time being, they were going to produce the latter.

“I'm sure you're displeased to start out with the beta formula, but I hope you're keeping the long game in mind.”

“Oh, I'm hardly displeased. If anything, I think it's quite appropriate to take baby steps toward perfection.”

“It's true that running at full speed only draws attention. Baby steps will still yield results with these methods. And if your progress appears to be natural enough, we should fly under the princesses' radar.”

If there were sudden, drastic technological advancements on Earth, the Forthorthian government would have every reason to suspect a leak. But if development was slow and steady, they could evade such scrutiny—which was Ralgwin's goal. He and his Earthling business partner would still have a monopoly even with the imperfect beta formula. High-strength metals were in demand in almost every manufacturing industry on Earth. And with virtually no research costs, their margins would be sky high.

“Moreover, Lord Ralgwin, releasing the technology in two phases means we can dominate the market twice.”

The beta formula would inevitably be copied eventually. But once that happened, they could simply switch to producing the superior alpha formula. It would be a devastating blow to their competitors and ensure their monopoly for years to come. By their roughest estimates, they would have the market cornered for the next decade.

“Hmm, I hadn't considered that. You make a good point,” Ralgwin said with a satisfied grin. He was pleased that his business partner was turning out to be

smarter than expected.

“There’s also a question of yield. Maximizing production at the outset will be problematic.”

If they moved into full-scale production before refining the manufacturing process, they would eat the cost of trial and error as they went. Moreover, they’d be producing inferior material as they learned. That was why Ralgwin’s business partner wanted to take the time to hone the process before moving into mass production. The ultimate payout in the quality of the product would be well worth it.

Thus, from a business perspective, everything was coming together nicely. The two-phase production should be a huge success.

“Hmm, perhaps you didn’t need my help after all.”

“Worry not, Lord Ralgwin. I’ll show you soon enough that you made the right choice to invest in us.”

“Oh? Have you found something?”

“Yes. We’ve made contact with the original owners of that device.”

“My, my. Let’s hear your report, then.”

“Of course. First of all...”

Ralgwin was still unused to Earth and its denizens, so having his new business partner make contact with Earthlings for him was an incredible boon. It seemed their partnership was coming to great fruition. And so Ralgwin’s plan—rather, his invasion—was slowly progressing in the shadows.

Sunday With a Cat and Ruth

Sunday, May 29th

Room 106 regularly hosted a crowd of ten, but with the addition of Nalfa and Kotori to the Corona House crew, their numbers had now increased to twelve. Even when Clan deployed her gravitational device to allow sitting on the walls and ceilings, a dozen people was still enough to make the tiny apartment feel cramped. For better or worse, however, a certain incident had recently opened up a hole in the wall between room 106 and room 105 next door. Now everyone could freely travel back and forth between Koutarou's apartment and Nalfa's, effectively doubling the space. Today, however, the girls were all gathered in room 106 specifically.

"Meow!"

"Stop that, Snoozy. It's bad manners," Maki scolded.

"Mrrrow!"

"Aww!" the girls cried out in unison.

Everyone was fixated on Snoozy, who had his front legs on Maki as he ate out of her hands. She was holding his favorite food, so he was gobbling it down with gusto. Really, she was wasting her breath telling him to mind his manners. The hungry kitty, however, had stolen the girls' hearts.

"I have to say I'm a little jealous that such a cute cat has taken a liking to you, Maki-san," Harumi said on behalf of all the girls present.

Snoozy was always following Maki around. It was almost like he'd adopted her and not the other way around. Lately, he spent more time with Maki than his own mother.

"He can be a handful, but he's also really affectionate... He's helped me find balance and purpose."

Maki treasured the cat in return, so she wasn't displeased by their current

arrangement in the slightest. She happily took care of Snoozy without any complaints.

“Gosh, you should stop being so stubborn and just keep him already,” Sanae chimed in.

“Heehee. I want him to be free though, so the fact that he chooses to stay makes me very happy,” Maki replied.

Maki let Snoozy do as he pleased. She didn’t keep him cooped up in the apartment. Whenever he acted like he wanted to go outside, she would let him roam free. And whenever he returned, she would let him back inside. Maki wanted Snoozy to think of her as his family by choice. That was the way she’d kept her cats in her dream. Granted, she could always tell where Snoozy was thanks to her magic.

“Huh, that sounds tough. I’d want to play with him all the time,” mused Sanae.

“You mean with Satomi-kun?” asked Maki.

“Yeah! I always want to keep him near.”

“Then I don’t think you need to worry. That’s how things worked out for me.”

“Yeah, you’re right. So that’s how it is, huh?”

Snoozy meant a lot to Maki—and that was why she wanted him to choose her, just the same way she’d chosen Koutarou. Even if he was only a cat, she felt that he should be allowed to decide his destiny.

“By the way, what’s Dozy up to these days?” Kiriha asked as she skillfully teased Snoozy with a toy. Now that he’d finished eating, he was raring to play.

“Oh, Dozy’s been staying with an old lady in the neighborhood,” Maki explained.

“She’s been taking care of Dozy, but Dozy’s worried about her because she’s all alone,” Sanae added.

With Sanae’s psychic powers, she could discern the emotions of animals. And from what she could tell, Dozy kept coming back to the old lady out of concern for her.

“What a dutiful cat,” Kiriha commented.

“I think Dozy just likes looking after others,” said Sanae.

“You think so? What about Snoozy, then?” asked Shizuka.

“Dozy knows Snoozy has Maki. But you’re playing with me next, little guy!” replied Theia.

“Meow!”

After having fun with Kiriha, Snoozy wiggled over to Theia next. Theia was quick and had great reflexes, making her the perfect playmate for a cat. Lately, Snoozy had taken to a little game of tag where he would slowly approach Theia. When he was close enough, she would try to catch him. Of course, Snoozy would run—that was the fun of the game—but he’d always come creeping back. Playing with Theia was just too much fun to resist.

“Kotori, could you brighten the lights a little?”

“Sure... Is this good?”

“That’s great. Thanks.”

Nalfa wanted to photograph Theia and Snoozy, so she turned to her assistant, Kotori. Nalfa’s video series, “Nalfa Laren’s Japan Chronicles,” was still trending in Forthorthe. Her latest video on the animals of Earth was especially popular. Her viewership was at an all-time high, and photos or videos she posted of Theia and Snoozy were always a highlight. As such, she’d decided to do a special on the two of them.

“Gotcha!”

“Meow!”

Snoozy had been unable to escape Theia this round. His punishment was a belly rub, though he didn’t seem to mind too terribly much. After a few more rounds of tag, he eventually climbed into Theia’s lap.

“Your Highness, the tea is ready,” announced Ruth.

She’d predicted exactly when Theia and Snoozy’s playtime would come to an end and planned to serve tea accordingly. As usual, her timing was impeccable.

“Thank you, Ruth.”

“Meow?”

“It’s tea, Snoozy. You didn’t like it last time, remember?”

“...Meow...”

Theia took an elegant sip from her cup as Snoozy curled up in her lap. They were adorable together.

“Aww, that’s so cute... Other than Aika-san, I think Snoozy likes you the most, Theia-chan,” Shizuka commented with a sigh. She wanted Snoozy to adore her as much as Theia, but she didn’t think things were going well.

“I think he likes you a lot too, Kasagi-san,” Harumi said with a smile. She could tell that Snoozy looked up to her.

“But I don’t want any more earthworms!”

“Just yesterday, he came to present me with a grasshopper he caught.”

“That’s Uncle Dragon for you, ho!”

“All hail the Fire Dragon Emperor, ho!”

“Hahaha, I’ve still got it!”

Shizuka’s problem was that Snoozy looked up to her *too* much. His natural instincts told him that she was strong, and he subsequently regarded her as the king of the jungle. He often came to pay his respects in the form of his latest catch. Playing with her casually was out of the question, and he kept a deferential distance from her accordingly. Whenever Shizuka approached, he would get nervous and back away humbly. Alunaya—the real reason Snoozy behaved this way—thought it was splendid, but Shizuka just wanted to play with the cute little kitten.

“You’re lucky. I wish he’d just give me some space...” mumbled Clan, who was quite envious of Shizuka.

Clan thought that Snoozy was adorable too, but she was the indoorsy type who’d never had much contact with animals. She simply wanted to observe the cute critter from a distance. Snoozy, meanwhile, had no regard for her personal

space. Sometimes he'd even sneak up on her and try to surprise her.

"I hardly know what to do when such a cutie startles me like that..."

"But you don't have any problems when Master does it, do you, Clan-sama?"

"P-Pardomshiha! H-How could you suggest such a thing?!"

"Oh, Clan-sama... Teehee."

Ruth knew who was most precious to Clan, but the boy in question wasn't actually present at the moment. At least... he wasn't until he heard Ruth call for him.

"Did you need something, Ruth-san?" he asked, peeking his head through the curtain that covered the hole between the apartments.

Koutarou had been working on his homework in room 105, so he hadn't really picked up on what the girls were discussing—merely that Ruth had mentioned him.

"W-We were just talking about you! It's not like we need you!"

"My apologies, Master."

"I see."

"So you can go back to doing your homework, Veltlion!"

"Okay, I'm on it."

Since he wasn't needed, Koutarou quickly lost interest and retreated through the curtain to get back to work. He'd actually started working in room 106 first, but when Snoozy showed up, all the girls gathered to play with the kitten. This was an everyday occurrence as of late, however, so Koutarou was prepared for it.

"..."

Clan watched him go with puffed-up cheeks. Ruth saw her expression and couldn't help smiling.

"Heehee. It seems you escaped, but that's too bad, isn't it?"

"I don't care about him! Jeez!"

If Koutarou had actually overheard their conversation, Clan would have been mortified. Nevertheless, his apparent lack of interest was frustrating. Ruth knew the delicate position Clan found herself in, however, so her smile was a sympathetic one.

In truth, room 106 wasn't very conducive to studying. There was always something happening, so distractions and interruptions were frequent. That was why Koutarou had taken to doing his homework in room 105. In fact, Koutarou was grateful that Snoozy would often keep the girls occupied while he worked.

"Mrow..."

But, as expected of a cat, Snoozy didn't always behave according to plan. Before Koutarou knew it, Snoozy was pawing at his leg in room 105.

"Meow!"

"Shouldn't you be in the other room playing with everyone?"

"Meow."

Snoozy clearly didn't understand Koutarou, but even if he had, he likely wouldn't have listened anyway. Cats can be selfish, after all, and it was clear what Snoozy wanted. He'd dragged a toy over to Koutarou and was nudging it up against him.

"Come on. If you want to play, you can go play with someone else."

Snoozy looked up at Koutarou with big, expectant eyes. It was the same expression Sanae and Theia sometimes gave him. And though Koutarou's psychic powers were nothing compared to Sanae's, he was still empathetic when it came to animals.

"I know you like playing too, so play with me!"

Koutarou knew that was what Snoozy was trying to say, so, with a wry smile, he reluctantly picked up the toy—a baseball.

"You're not wrong, little guy..."

"Meow!"

Seeing Koutarou with the baseball in hand, Snoozy got low to the ground. Even though he was as tiny as could be, he looked like he was a big cat on a big hunt.

“Catch!”

“Mrow!”

When Koutarou threw the ball, Snoozy whipped around and flew after it.

“Aww!” the girls, who were watching through the hole in the wall, collectively exclaimed.

Looks like I won't be getting back to my homework any time soon...

Koutarou had been working on physics, which wasn't his strong suit. It took a great deal of focus to solve the problems, and there was no way he could concentrate with Snoozy and the girls around. Accepting this, he put his pencil down and began playing with the cat in earnest.

“All right, Snoozy, since you're a magical girl's cat, we're gonna need you in top form!”

“Meow!”

Every time Koutarou threw the ball, Snoozy ran after it. It was almost doglike, but Snoozy was deadly serious about the chase. It was hard to tell if he was playing or hunting. The baseball would've been in grave danger if it were a small mouse.

“Next up is a screwball!”

“Meow, meow!”

Snoozy loved playing with Koutarou because he had lots of different throws to use—the baseball was always moving differently. Of course, Koutarou couldn't throw it very hard in the small apartment, but he could put a spin on it that would make it bounce off the tatami mat in all different directions. It was a surprise to Snoozy every time, almost like the ball had a mind of its own.

“That's clever. Maybe I should learn to throw like that too,” Shizuka mused.

“I don't think he'll bring the ball to you so long as dragon uncle is around,”

Sanae interjected.

“Hahaha! You’ll have to forgive my magnificent presence!”

“Clan, if you like the cat enough to record data on it, then you should just play with it too,” said Theia.

“M-My data is none of your business!”

“Oh, I’d love to get footage of Koutarou-sama and Princess Clan playing with the cat together! Please, Your Highness!”

“See? Even the citizens want you to do it.”

“I-I’m still too scared!”

Koutarou and the girls continued to play with the cat for a while after that. Koutarou would toss the ball to someone else and Snoozy would chase after it. At one point, he even climbed up Clan’s shoulder. It was a fun afternoon for human and cat alike...

But the return of a certain someone would bring a raincloud over the apartment that no one expected.

Yurika returned to the apartment around 10 o’clock that night. She’d started a part-time job recently, so it wasn’t out of the ordinary for her to come home at such an hour... but one look at her made it quite clear that *something* was out of the ordinary.

“Waaah! Satomi-saaan!”

She flew into the room with tears freely flowing down her cheeks. Startled, Snoozy ran over to Maki and hid behind her. Koutarou was also quite alarmed and turned to Yurika with great concern.

“What’s wrong?!”

“My workplace is getting shut down again!”

“What?!”

Yurika had been through multiple part-time jobs now, and each one had come to an abrupt end when her workplace was suddenly shut down. It seemed her

newest job was no exception, meaning she'd been left out in the cold without a paycheck yet again.

"You took some weird job again, didn't you?!"

"No, I didn't! It was just at the shopping street store that sells imported goods!"

After unwittingly winding up working for the yakuza and an evil corporation, Yurika had learned her lesson: easy money is just too good to be true. Suspicious warehouses and underground facilities are exactly that—suspicious. So, in an effort to find honest work, Yurika had set her sights on the shopping street. Surely, she thought, the local shops there were too small to be involved in big crime. The wages were reasonable too, so there were no obvious red flags. Yurika had thus settled on a job at the imported goods store with confidence—confidence that lasted a mere three days.

"Are you kidding?! What did you do this time?!"

"I didn't do anything! I never did before, either! It was never my fault!"

"Oh, that's right. Sorry. Anyway, what happened?"

"They were smuggling gold in with the other imported goods!"

"Smuggling gold?"

Koutarou was unfamiliar with the practice. He could imagine buying gold on the cheap internationally and bringing it to Japan to flip, but it seemed to him like the costs involved in such a process would ultimately offset the profits. So, for an explanation, he turned to Kiriha.

"If the value of precious metals brought into Japan is high enough, you're required to pay certain taxes on them."

"So you're taxed here even if you bring the gold in from somewhere else?"

"Indeed. And gold smuggling is actually about taking advantage of that."

"Huh? How?"

"When the gold is brought in illicitly, the smuggler avoids paying taxes on it. They then, however, turn around and sell the gold through proper channels to

earn a rebate on the taxes they ought to have paid when it was imported.”

“Wait, so if you smuggle it in and then sell it, *you* get the tax money?”

“Precisely. It’s an easy way to steal tax money, so it’s how a lot of white-collar criminals get their start.”

“I had no idea...”

Koutarou let out an unconscious groan. Crimes in his simple head meant hurting people or stealing from them directly. He’d never even considered how someone might abuse the system before.

“That said, large sales of gold tend to attract attention. It’s relatively easy to catch individuals dealing in it, which is likely what happened at Yurika’s workplace.”

Smuggling wasn’t an easy gig. There was the difficult task of getting the gold into the country unnoticed, and then the matter of selling it off discreetly. That was why most large operations were run by organizations rather than individuals, and Yurika’s employer was no such enterprise.

“The police are just awful..”

“Don’t take it personally, Yurika. They’re probably in the middle of a big investigation, so they have to suspect everyone.”

Koutarou thought he finally understood why Yurika was so unhappy. He assumed the police had grilled her over her involvement in the case, and she was upset that they suspected her.

“No! The problem is that they didn’t suspect me at all!”

“Huh...?”

As it turned out, however, Koutarou had the wrong idea entirely. His jaw hit the floor as Yurika shared her story.

“Wow, this katsudon is great! Thank you, officers!”

“So, what do you think, partner?”

“No matter how you slice it... there’s no way this girl was entrusted with

anything valuable.”

“Yeah, I think so too. She was just a part-time worker who got caught up in the mess. It was only her third day there.”

“All right, young lady, you can go home once you’re done eating. Sorry for keeping you here so late. Just doing our job.”

“Come on, officers! Can’t you suspect me at least a little bit?! Please!”

Yurika was actually upset because the police *never* suspected her. It would have been one thing if they simply thought she was an upstanding citizen... but it was really because they believed no one would have trusted her to be a part of the operation. It felt like they were calling her incompetent, and Yurika had her pride—however small it might be.

Still, I’m glad nothing actually happened...

Koutarou let out a sigh of relief even as Yurika slammed her fists into the tea table in anguish. He was glad Yurika hadn’t done anything wrong; she’d just been unlucky. That being the case, he wanted to do something for her to console her.

“Say, Yurika...”

“I’m not incompetent, you hear me?! I could be a great bad guy if I wanted—Huh? What is it?”

When Koutarou called out to her, Yurika slowly turned his way. She still had tears streaming down her face, which panged Koutarou’s heart. He hated seeing her like this.

“Why don’t you just stop working?”

“I can’t! Then I won’t be able to buy manga!”

“If you need money, I can help you out.”

“What?! Really?! Th-Then I’ll stop working right now!”

Koutarou’s plan was to take care of Yurika. He still had his salary from Theia, so supporting her financially was no issue. He had every intention of cutting her

off when she became an adult to encourage her to be independent, but he wanted her to be able to focus on her studies as they prepared for university. He had an ulterior motive, too. Though he would never admit it, this was his way of making sure he would never have to see Yurika so distraught over losing a job again. These unfortunate incidents weren't her fault, and he would rather take care of her than see her this sad.

"In return, I expect you to take all the time you would've spent working and spend it studying instead."

He'd also been concerned about the lack of time she'd been spending on school lately, so this plan would kill two birds with one stone.

"Whaaat?! But then when will I read all the manga I'm going to buy?!"

"You idiot! It'd be the same if you were working a real job!"

"Nooo! Don't be mean to me, Satomi-saaan!"

When Yurika realized that this arrangement would mean having to study more, she threw herself at Koutarou and clung to him desperately.

"Tough break."

But unlike before, her tears would no longer move him. He knew these tears were different and, moreover, that studying would do her good.

"Satomi-saaan, can't you give me just a liiittle time for anime and manga? Pleeese?"

"You'll get it anyway. I don't have to give it to you."

"Huh?"

"Think about it. All that time you would've spent commuting and stuff is now free time. I bet you're saving over an hour this way."

"Come to think of it, between getting changed, doing my hair, and actually getting to work... Yeah, you're right! That's at least an hour!"

After talking a bit more with Koutarou, Yurika finally stopped crying. Despite her worst fears, he wasn't actually being mean to her. In fact, he was really helping her out.

“As for your allowance... Since you should be studying anyway, I’ll pay you half what your part time job did, so 400 yen an hour.”

“You can go a little higher! You’re so generous after all, Satomi-san!”

“I think being able to buy a volume of manga for an hour’s worth of studying is a pretty good deal.”

“Hmm... Yeah, you’re right. Okay, then I’ll do my best studying!”

“If you manage to raise your grades, I’ll raise your pay.”

“Yay! Wait, what happens if my grades go down?”

“So does your allowance.”

“Whaaaaa?! Why do you have to be so mean?!”

“Just think of this as a job. You gotta work for it.”

“Ugh, Satomi-san, you’re so stern...”

Once they ironed out the details of Yurika’s new “job,” she was all smiles again. Koutarou was relieved, even if he would never cop to it. Unfortunately for him, however, Shizuka caught him grinning.



“Heehee, so you’ve finally taken your first wife, you sly dog you. You’re too stubborn, you know?” she giggled, nudging him with her elbow as she did.

She seemed to be enjoying herself a bit too much. Almost like she’d been waiting for this.

“It’s not like that, Landlord-san.”

“I think it is, Satomi-kun. Not only are you letting her live with you, now you’re supporting her too.”

In order to manifest the true sword of kingship, Shizuka and the other girls had staked their lives—their very souls—for Koutarou’s sake. They were safe and sound now, but they’d had no idea what would come of them at the time. They’d all happily made a pledge that would have made even longtime spouses hesitate, and Koutarou knew that. There was no way he could spurn any of them now. So once he came to terms with his own feelings, he’d have no choice but to accept the girls’ one at a time. At least, that’s how Shizuka saw it, and it seemed like Yurika had been the first lucky girl. That was why she was teasing Koutarou now.

“Y-You’ve got it all wrong! Look, she’s out of a job now and it’s not even her fault! I can’t just do *nothing* for her!”

“So that’s how you’re gonna spin it, hmm? Heeheehee...”

“I’m Satomi-san’s wife?! Are we gonna have a honeymoon?!”

“Keep dreaming!”

Wham!

“I-I’m sowwy, Shatomi-shan...”

Of course, Koutarou wanted nothing to do with this idea. He was a serious, earnest boy who believed in having one partner. He believed that a proper man should have one wife, that a proper man would be able to choose. He was vaguely aware that making his own choice would be difficult, but that didn’t shake his beliefs. He was awkward that way.

“Don’t worry, Satomi Koutarou,” Kiriha, who’d been listening in, said with a grin.

“Huh? About what?”

“I don’t mind being a mistress. I love you, and I know that you love me. The surface’s marriage laws are none of my concern.”

Her smile was incredibly reassuring, but the words out of her mouth were extremely alarming. They lit a fire under all the other girls in room 106.

“Ah, in that case, I wanna be the ghost haunting you!” chimed in Sanae.

“Sanae-chan, at least offer to help out with chores...” her other half scolded.

“I’ll... be in charge of Satomi-kun’s pets,” Maki shyly declared.

“Meow!” Snoozy agreed.

“My position depends on Her Highness,” said Ruth.

“So you say, but you would stop me if I chose someone other than Koutarou, wouldn’t you, Ruth?” Theia asked.

“Of course, Your Highness.”

“I’m impressed you can say that with a straight face, Pardomshiha...” mumbled Clan.

“What about you, Sakuraba-senpai?” Shizuka asked.

“I... I will believe in Satomi-kun and follow him,” Harumi replied.

“How mature...”

“And what about yourself, Kasagi-san?”

“I’d like to build a house in a quiet town and live happily with my family...”

“I get that. A nice, peaceful life sounds wonderful.”

The girls were now all excitedly talking about the future. As expected of teenagers, they were full of hopes and dreams... But in spite of their different ambitions, their goals all had one thing in common: their futures were together. And not just with Koutarou, but with each other. The girls now shared a deep bond thanks to the crests on their foreheads, and the idea of living the rest of their lives without each other had never once crossed any of their minds.

“Teehee. Kou-niisan sure has it rough. He thinks he still has to decide, but the

girls have already made their decision. I don't think he'll ever be able to break the circle they've formed around him..."

"He's a very kind person, so it would be hard for him... I do think the girls have the upper hand here."

Kotori and Nalfa shared a glance and a laugh. They had no idea how Koutarou and the girls' relationship had become so complex, but they couldn't imagine Koutarou ever picking one of the girls over the others. Nevertheless, that wouldn't stop the earnest Koutarou from trying. He was like Don Quixote going up against the windmills—it was a battle he was determined to fight, but one he could never win. Kotori and Nalfa couldn't help feeling a little sorry for him, despite their giggling.

When Ruth said she was going out shopping, Koutarou quickly offered to come along. He claimed that groceries for twelve people would be far too much for Ruth to carry on her own, but in truth, he was just desperate to extricate himself from an uncomfortable conversation. Shopping was as good an excuse as any.

"At 1 PM, we have a meeting with a bipartisan group of legislators concerning an addendum of special exceptions for medical technology. At 2 PM, we have our regular press conference. And at 3 PM, we have a cultural exchange meeting between Japan, Earth, and Forthorthe. Once that's over, we'll be going to inspect the spaceport under construction."

Ruth certainly didn't mind the company. In fact, she was happy to have some time alone with Koutarou. He would be escorting Theia and Clan to some appointments the following day, so she wanted to be able to brief him without interruption. Tomorrow's inspection of the spaceport would be especially important, as they would be in an open area that required more security than usual.

"Sounds like Theia and Clan are going to be busy."

Theia and Clan were both attending Kisshouharukaze High School, but they had to take time off for official duties every now and then. Their days were always busy, their schedules packed full... But it was what they'd chosen for

themselves. In spite of their obligations, they still wanted to be normal high school students as much as possible.

“I’ll be counting on you, Master.”

“You can leave the princesses to me, Ruth-san. I’ll protect them.”

Though his powers were borrowed, Koutarou had a unique combination of strengths that made him an excellent bodyguard. The added responsibility of watching over two princesses cramped his own schedule, but he never complained.

“If anything, Master, I want you to protect their hearts.”

“I’ll... try my best.”

“Yes, please do. Heehee.”

Though her sisterly relationship with Theia was much stronger, Ruth was always doing her best to take care of the two princesses. In other words, she always put herself last. She was constantly telling Koutarou to protect Theia and Clan—ideally both physically and emotionally.

I need to protect Ruth-san too...

Koutarou, however, knew that Theia and Clan would be terribly aggrieved if anything ever happened to Ruth. That meant he’d have to keep her safe too in order to keep the princesses happy.

But not just for Theia’s or Clan’s sake...

While he struggled to express it, Koutarou wanted to protect Ruth for his own sake as well. Her presence in his life had a big influence on him. The crest on her forehead was part of that, but Koutarou still would have felt the same way without it. Ruth wasn’t important to him because of the crest; rather, she had the crest because they were both important to each other. Koutarou didn’t know what he’d do without her.

“Huh?” Koutarou unwittingly looked to Ruth as he was thinking about her, and her outfit caught his eye. “That’s not what you normally wear, is it, Ruth-san?”

Ruth generally preferred subdued clothing so as not to upstage Theia in any

way. In her book, a guard competing with a princess was out of the question.

“Can you tell?”

“Yeah, it’s even cuter than usual...”

Her outfit today, however, was anything but subdued. With the weather getting warmer, she’d opted for something much shorter than usual. The light blue and white ensemble was also much more eye-catching, but still very Ruth-like. It was a cute look that put fashion over function, yet Koutarou thought it was stylish without being tacky.

“It, um... It looks good on you.”

“R-Really?”

With Koutarou staring at her, Ruth turned bright red. She was one third happy that he’d noticed, one third bashful from being stared at, and one third embarrassed over being praised. In truth, she was so elated that she could just burst into dance, but her modest nature held the reins on her emotions.

“Yeah... Thinking about it, you’re always dressed for work since you’re always technically on the job. I feel like this is the first time I’ve ever seen you in your own clothes... It’s nice.”

“Master...”

“I didn’t know this was your style, Ruth-san.”

Ruth ordinarily chose her clothing to compliment Theia’s, but she’d chosen this outfit entirely for herself. Koutarou had known her for over two years now, but it was indeed the first time he’d seen her dress this way. It made quite an impression on him.

“I wanted to wear something blue...”

“Why?”

“To match you, Master...”

To Ruth, being the vice captain of the Satomi knights was just as important as being Theia’s retainer. Blue was a significant color to her. Moreover... she’d once had a dream about wearing an outfit like this. In her dream, she was

actively taking steps to get closer with Koutarou, so she'd bought this outfit in hopes of being able to do the same thing.

"I-I see..."

It was now Koutarou's turn to blush. Hearing Ruth had chosen the color because of him, he felt both overwhelmingly happy and bashful. That left both him and Ruth unsure of what to say to each other, so they stood there in silence for some time.

"W-Well, we've got shopping to do, Ruth-san!"

"Yes, Master. L-Let's go."

Just staring at each other when they were both so flustered was difficult. The easiest way Koutarou could think of to get out of the awkward situation was to go about their errand. And so they proceeded to the shopping street as if nothing had happened—which was an honest relief to both of them.

"So, about our schedule for tomorrow..." Ruth began, going back to what she'd originally wanted to discuss with Koutarou.

"That's enough about tomorrow."

"M-Master?"

"We can save work for later," Koutarou replied as he stared straight ahead of them, just as red as he was before.

"Oh... Of course."

Ruth was puzzled for a moment, but she understood everything when she saw Koutarou's face. It nearly brought her to tears, but she managed to hold them in. She didn't want to ruin the moment.

"Earlier, Kiriha-sama said that she wouldn't mind being your mistress, but I wouldn't mind staying your vice captain..."

She wrapped her arm around Koutarou's and gently leaned against him. They began walking like that, though their hastened heartbeats had them going at much slower pace than before.

"Honestly, I don't think this is how captains and vice captains are supposed to

behave. It feels like mixing work and personal affairs...”

“Then that’s the kind of vice captain I’d like to be.”

Arms entwined, they continued forward in the warm early summer breeze. It was a little too hot to be so close together, but neither one of them particularly seemed to care. They had other things on their minds.

“You could give Kiriha-san a run for her money, you know that, Ruth-san?”

“I know. But you see, Master, women simply have certain needs.”

“What? Are you saying that I can’t mix business and pleasure too?”

“I wouldn’t have objected before, but I think I’ve changed my mind.”

“I guess I screwed up, huh?”

“I’m blessed to have such a sensitive, understanding captain, teehee...”

Thus they went along their merry way, chatting all the way to the shopping street about nothing in particular.

Unexpected Attack

Sunday, May 29th

Ruth was an alien—that much was common knowledge in Kisshouharukaze City. She'd appeared on TV alongside Theia several times now, so her identity was no longer a secret. The big reveal had caused quite a stir along the shopping street at first, but that was months ago now.

"Here, Ruth-chan, take some of this fish with you. It's on the house."

"Are you sure?!"

"As I recall, Theia-chan likes it."

"Thank you very much!"

The fuss had long died down and everything was back to normal. The two years prior played a big part in that. Everybody in the neighborhood already knew Ruth was kind, earnest, and respectable. She spoke perfect Japanese and, alien or not, she was still a foreign transfer student at a local school. In essence, beyond the initial shock of her origins, she was just an ordinary girl.

Granted, there were those who had a harder time accepting it than others, but their confusion was only natural. There were also those who took what one might call a mercantile approach to things. Who would want to miss out on potential business by giving a star Forthorthian customer the cold shoulder, after all?

"Isn't that nice, Ruth-san?"

"Yes!"

But beyond the befuddlement and self-interest, most everyone on the shopping street still treated Ruth like they always had. It seemed like a good omen for relations between Japan and Forthorthe. Ruth welcomed their kindness, both as their neighbor and as a public figure.

“Heehee... I think we should switch things up and make pizza tonight.”

“That’s a great idea, Ruth-san.”

Koutarou peered into their shopping bag. They were originally planning on making Chinese food for dinner, but between the bargain shopping they’d done and all the freebies they’d gotten today, a change of plans was in order. With just a few more ingredients, they’d be all set for pizza.

“We’ll need to buy some bacon and flour.”

“You’re gonna make the dough and everything, Ruth-san?”

“I figured I might as well. The sauce too.”

“Do you think we have enough tomatoes?”

“We have some reserves aboard the Hazy Moon.”

“I see, so you’re planning on using those up.”

“Heehee, that’s right.”

Ruth appeared to be in high spirits as she walked along with Koutarou, who had come to carry things for her. And the more stores they stopped at, the larger his load became. Ruth loved frequenting the local shops here on the shopping street, you see. There were people who preferred high-efficiency trips to the supermarket to get everything they needed in one place, but shopping that way made Ruth feel like she was back in Forthorthe. Meanwhile, coming here to visit individual stores, greet their shopkeepers, and smile at her neighbors was an experience completely unique to Kisshouharukaze City.



“Okay, I think that’s everything.”

Ruth dragged Koutarou everywhere from the big liquor store to the small foreign food mart. Between all their stops, it took over half an hour to cross everything off their list.

“All right, time to head home.”

“But Master... can you even see in front of you like that?”

“Through the gaps, yeah.”

Courtesy of Ruth’s shopping spree, Koutarou was now loaded down with a colossal bundle of groceries. Looking at him from the front, it appeared as though the groceries had sprouted Koutarou’s legs and were now walking around. With Sanae’s psychic enhancements, he barely minded the weight. The real problem was his field of vision, which was reduced to the tiny gaps between the packages in his arms. He could sense enough with his psychic powers, however, that he was at least certain he wouldn’t run into anyone.

“Master, let’s transfer to Hazy Moon for a moment.”

“Don’t worry. I can handle this.”

“You can’t! It’s dangerous!”

Koutarou walked forward with steady, confident steps, but Ruth was nervous. She knew he was only able to move so deftly around the people on the street because he could sense their auras—which meant he still needed to worry about bumps in the road, signs, and other inanimate obstacles.

“Besides, Master, I can’t see your face like this...”

“Ruth-san...”

“A-Anyways, let’s move somewhere more private!”

“O-Okay.”

The easiest way to get the groceries home was a transfer gate via the Hazy Moon. But since they couldn’t allow anyone to see unknown Forthorthian tech in action, they’d need to find a secluded place to use it. Thus they made their way into a back alley behind a line of shops.

This particular alley was only used by the occasional delivery truck. There were hardly ever any people around, so Ruth thought it would be the ideal place to set up a transfer gate. Unfortunately, however, it was also the perfect place for someone to spy on them...

At present, someone was indeed observing. Their original mission was simply to tail Koutarou and Ruth without being noticed, and the spy had shadowed their entire shopping trip by keeping their distance and blending in with the crowd. The mission, however, had since changed. When the spy reported that Koutarou and Ruth were now alone together, a new order came down: assassinate them.

“The distance is, um... 4,192 meters? I can’t get used to these Earth measurements...”

The change in objective was sudden, but the spy was prepared—for this “spy” was really a trained sniper. They’d already taken up a position atop a nearby building with an Earth-made rifle. It handled a little differently than the Forthorthian ones they were used to, but things would be more... convenient... if the murder weapon was an Earth-made firearm. Just like the plot against Nalfa, the main goal of this mission was to cause friction between the two planets.

“I guess this is the end of the famous Pardomshiha family...”

Ruth was currently centered in the rifle’s scope. The sniper’s ideal target was a Forthorthian, after all. There were two other reasons the sniper had her in their sights, however. The first was simply that it was hard to get a clear shot at Koutarou with all of the groceries he was carrying in the way. The second was that Ruth’s loss would be devastating.

After carefully scrutinizing the facts of the Forthorthian civil war, Vandarion’s remaining faction had reached an interesting conclusion. Beyond magic and psychic powers, which they still didn’t fully grasp, they believed their biggest threat wasn’t the Blue Knight or the empress’s battle-ready daughter, but rather Ruth—their data management specialist who was really running things behind the scenes.

Whenever Elfaria's faction was in action, Theia generally decided their objectives and Kiriha would come up with a strategy to achieve them. Clan often assisted in the process, but it was Ruth who actually put said strategies into motion. She could aggregate troops and weapons, and account for weather, terrain, formations, and more.

So by shooting Ruth, Vandarion's faction believed they'd be taking out Koutarou and company's chief mastermind. It was all too easy to assume the Blue Knight and the princess were the stars of the group, but Ruth was essentially its nervous system.

"At this range, not even the Blue Knight will see it coming..."

Chak...

The sniper made their final adjustments and prepared to fire. In their hand was actually an anti-material rifle, an exceedingly powerful weapon with a normal range of between two and three kilometers. This particular rifle had been enhanced with Forthorthian modifications, however, so its actual range was well beyond that... an unthinkable distance for most Earth weapons. The sniper had no reason to worry about anyone finding them after the fact; no one would know to look this far away. A trained Forthorthian soldier might, but there certainly weren't any stationed in the suburbs of Earth.

That meant the only real risk was whatever equipment and abilities that Koutarou and Ruth currently had on them, but the extreme distance between them and the sniper alleviated such concerns. The sniper was quite confident they would be able to walk away when the deed was done, leaving their pursuers to search for them in vain.

"Sniping with a domestic weapon... It's a strange mission, but I need to stay on guard until it's done."

The sniper put their finger over the trigger and held their breath. They'd already taken wind speed and direction, temperature, and range into account. Their crosshairs were set slightly above and to the left of Ruth's head—a guaranteed bullet between the eyes. The sniper would just take a few seconds to steady themselves and then take the shot.

Sorry, but this is the end for you...

The sniper slowly and steadily squeezed their trigger finger inward. It only took a moment, but it was the longest moment imaginable to the sniper. That was when something strange happened...

Bang!

“What?!”

Just as the sniper fired, Ruth disappeared from their scope—in other words, the assassination was a failure. Rounds fired from the anti-material rifle moved at a terrifying 1,000 meters per second, meaning it would take all of four seconds to travel the four kilometers between them... but Ruth was already gone. The startled sniper released their rifle and turned to their support computer, which had recorded the sniping attempt. The sniper played it back, and...

“Huh?!”

When they saw the footage for themselves, they were absolutely stunned. The Blue Knight had suddenly pulled Ruth out of the way of the speeding bullet. That was shocking enough all on its own, but the live feed was just as astonishing.

The Blue Knight is looking right this way!

It was as plain as day. The Blue Knight was now looking straight at the sniper as he held Ruth close in a protective embrace.

Thwack!

Right on schedule, a small hole appeared in the ground just next to Koutarou. The bullet had finally reached its mark, but the sniper didn't care in the moment. They were nearly frozen on the spot, still stunned by this unthinkable turn of events.

Koutarou had noticed the sniper when they held their breath—an act that made their killing intent quite clear. Koutarou's psychic powers allowed him to see the trajectory of the attack aimed straight at Ruth's forehead. It was coming from some distance away, but it would clearly be deadly.

“Ruth-san!”

Koutarou didn’t hesitate to throw the groceries aside and reach for Ruth. When he did, the killing intent grew even stronger. The attack was imminent.

“Let me make it!”

It was all Koutarou could do to try to get Ruth out of the way. He knew he only had a precious few seconds to save her given the intensity of the killing intent, and the clarity of the incoming attack told him the attacker wasn’t going to miss.

“M-Master?!”

Fortunately for both of them, Ruth offered no resistance. Though surprised by Koutarou’s sudden actions, she let him do as he pleased. The idea of refusing him never even crossed her mind as he firmly embraced her.

“We’re under attack!”

“What?!”

Momentarily ignoring the shocked Ruth, Koutarou immediately started searching out the source of the killing intent. The projection of an attack changed based on the weapon. Swords rendered sweeping arcs and dragon’s breath almost a cone shape. This one had been a perfectly straight line—a trajectory unique to advanced projectile weapons. Koutarou traced the line to its origin and...

“Over there?! It’s coming from that far away?!”

He detected the attacker on the roof of a building over four kilometers away—a remarkable distance given that the world record for longest-range sniper shot stood at just over three and half kilometers. Koutarou didn’t know that specifically, but even so, the shot seemed unbelievably far to him... which gave him a hunch as to who might be behind it.

Thwack!

That was when a hole a couple of centimeters in size opened up in the asphalt just next to where they were standing. Sniper rounds typically traveled at around a thousand meters per second, and this one had taken just over four

seconds to reach them. Koutarou was grateful; it had given him time to react and save Ruth.

“A-A sniper?!” she squealed in surprise.

“Ruth-san, it’s Vandarion’s faction!” Koutarou declared.

He didn’t think anyone else could be responsible for the attack. He hadn’t sensed any spiritual energy or mana from the bullet, yet it had come from an incredible distance. It had to be the result of Forthorthian technology, and the only enemy faction that fit such a bill was the remnants of Vandarion’s army.

“We’re moving!”

“Kyah!”

Koutarou picked Ruth up and took off running. He knew they needed cover, but given that they were up against an anti-material rifle, he knew they’d need more than that to fully protect themselves.

Thwack!

Immediately after they took off running, a second hole opened up in the street behind them. It was where they’d just been standing, meaning they both could’ve been killed if they’d stayed still.

That was close... Wait, did they want us to run?!

With the second shot, Koutarou picked up on the sniper’s intention. Upon realizing they were being shot at, he’d instinctively run in the same direction he’d initially pulled Ruth. It was the sensible, practical thing to do. Just down the street was a vending machine they could use for cover, and they were still under fire. He wanted to make it to safety, but if the sniper’s second shot was an attempt to force his hand...

Koutarou couldn’t shake the thought, so he opted for a quick change of plans. He stopped running and set Ruth down.

“My swords!”

Thwack!

When he did, a shot landed just in front of the vending machine.

I knew it was a trap!

By taking a second shot at them, the sniper was trying to drive them to the closest source of cover for safety. If the sniper knew where they were running, after all, they could line up a shot and take them out before they reached their goal. It was a risky strategy that would take great skill to pull off at this distance, but this sniper was more than capable.

Which means next, they'll...

Given what he now knew, Koutarou was able to anticipate the sniper's next move. He braced himself and, just as he expected, four straight lines came right for them. Since Koutarou had seen through their lure plan, the sniper was now moving to cut off their escape.

"I'm counting on you, Signaltin! Saguratin!"

Thanks to the spiritual energy circuitry Sanae had wired in Koutarou's body, his physical abilities were far beyond that of a normal person. But even so, he couldn't reliably dodge sniper rounds while carrying Ruth without his armor. That being the case, he'd chosen to take the defensive with his two swords, which appeared at his command and shielded him with a barrier of magical yellow light.

Thwack! Thwack! Thwack!

Three shots bored into the asphalt around them, but the fourth struck true.

Ping!

It smashed into the barrier and destroyed it, but the impact was enough to alter the bullet's trajectory. It grazed Koutarou's cheek, but he and Ruth were otherwise free from harm. Koutarou's ability to read the incoming attack had protected them more than the actual barrier. Without it, they would have been in serious trouble.

"All right!"

Following the attack, Koutarou grabbed Ruth again and made a run for cover. The shots seemed to stop after the magical shield was broken, most likely because the sniper was out of bullets. Most anti-material rifles had limited

ammo capacity in exchange for increased range and power.

“Master, I’m sending an unmanned craft toward the sniper!”

Once they got to safety, Ruth began her counterattack. She tapped away on her bracelet while still in Koutarou’s arms, sending a small fighter drone to the roof of the building where the sniper was camped out. Koutarou hadn’t told her the sniper’s location; she’d intuited it herself when his swords appeared. When he called for them, you see, the crest on Ruth’s forehead began glowing, uniting her mind with his.

“I’m counting on you, Ruth-san!”

Ruth had already called her drone from the Hazy Moon’s transfer gate, so by the time Koutarou replied to her, it was already scanning the roof for the enemy. Koutarou, meanwhile, kept on the move. They were up against an anti-material rifle, so staying stationary behind a single vending machine wouldn’t protect them. Who knew what other tricks the sniper might have up their sleeve? Koutarou was going to play it safe until he knew for sure.

“Um... Master...”

“We’ve gotta keep running, Ruth-san! Just hang in there!”

“Um, okay, but...”

Ruth’s cheeks were bright red. She was obviously embarrassed over being carried, but that wasn’t the only reason.

“Are you hurt?” Koutarou asked.

“No, um... I’ll tell you later, so for now...”

Ruth looked down and leaned against Koutarou as she clung to him. Because their minds were now united via her crest, she knew more than just the enemy’s position. She could feel the intensity of his emotions, and right now, all he was thinking about was how much he couldn’t bear to lose her.

All snipers were trained to move after taking a shot. Because of the simple trajectory of their weapons, they were easy to locate after the fact—and thus easy to counterattack. That was why they were taught to shoot and run, both

on Earth and Forthorthe.

Forthorthians had even more means of detecting attacks and retaliating. Ruth had employed one such method by immediately sending a drone to the sniper's location. Having an escape plan in advance to avoid such counterattacks was an important part of surviving as a sniper.

"I'm glad you made it back in one piece, Fasta. You're the best sniper we have," said Ralgwin with a smile.

The mission had been an abject failure, but he didn't raise a fuss over it. His uncle would have raged, screaming at his subordinate at the top of his lungs for returning emptyhanded—but not Ralgwin. In that sense, he was the superior commander.

"I bear the responsibility for the failure of this mission. I will accept any punishment," the sniper replied in a stiff tone.

The sniper removed their mask as they addressed their leader, revealing the face of a young woman. Her exact age wasn't entirely clear, but she looked young enough to be called a girl, even. In spite of that, however, she looked ice cold. She knew that Ralgwin always remained calm, but also knew he could punish with a smile. She didn't take his words at face value.



“Now, now... Be at ease, Fasta. I sent you on this mission knowing it would fail.”

“What...?”

Fasta was shocked to hear Ralgwin say that. Considering his careful attitude, she was confident that he’d meant for her to succeed.

“That was why I sent you with the spiritual energy stealth device.”

Indeed, Fasta had safely been able to return to Ralgwin because of the stealth device he’d given her. After firing all seven shots, Fasta acted according to plan and fled the scene. She was long gone by the time Ruth’s drone reached the rooftop. Fasta’s escape hinged on making it down to the street as soon as possible. Forthorthian drones excelled at pursuit, and with Ruth’s exceptional operational skills, hers outperformed even their military-grade counterparts.

That said, Forthorthian drones were still proprietary technology that couldn’t be used in public on Earth. Ruth would have been able to pin Fasta down if she’d caught her on the roof, but she couldn’t pursue her into town. So by the time Fasta hit the streets, Koutarou and Ruth were forced to look for her themselves—and Fasta took advantage of that. She knew their search would be slow and inaccurate, and the stealth device allowed her to make her getaway unnoticed.

In truth, if Ralgwin had expected the mission to succeed, he wouldn’t have sent her with the stealth device in the first place. Ruth would have been dead, and Koutarou would’ve been left with no way to pursue the assassin. Fasta would have had plenty of time to escape at her leisure.

“But why would you send me on a mission you knew would fail...?”

“You were up against the Blue Knight, Fasta. Lord Vandarion himself demonstrated that he cannot be beaten by ordinary means. Instead, our goal this time around was simply to gather data on him. The death of that Pardomshiha girl would have simply been a bonus.”

“I see...”

Fasta finally understood Ralgwin’s motives. He simply wanted to know how

the Blue Knight would respond to a sniper, and taking out a key target in the process would be like killing two birds with one stone. Once Fasta realized that, she thought it was a very Ralgwin-like plan. And because the plan ultimately wasn't a failure after all, she wouldn't be punished for it.

"I admit, however, I never expected him to evade a sniper's bullets..." Ralgwin mused with an abhorrent expression.

That was the only part of Fasta's report that surprised him. At most, he'd expected Koutarou to block Fasta's shots. He'd witnessed footage of Koutarou's powerful defensive capabilities and even clever diversions using holograms... yet, this time, Koutarou had literally dodged a bullet. Such a feat wasn't impossible at relatively close ranges with good timing and a keen eye for muzzle flashes, but Koutarou had evaded a sniper shot with absolutely no warning ahead of time. It was enough to frustrate any enemy.

"Ralgwin-sama, may I speak?" Fasta asked.

"Go ahead," he agreed.

"I have no concrete evidence to support it, so I didn't mention it earlier... but I don't think the Blue Knight dodged after I fired. To me, it seemed like he moved even before I took the shot."

It was merely a hunch on Fasta's part, so she couldn't conclusively record it in her official report—it would only sound like an excuse. Now that she understood Ralgwin's true intentions for this mission, however, it seemed like critical information.

"Before you took the shot, you say?" Ralgwin inquired with a sharp look in his eyes.

He'd heard that Vandarion's mechanical dragon had incorporated technology capable of predicting the future. It was supposedly DKI's handiwork, but what Fasta was saying suggested that Koutarou and company had their hands on it as well.

"Yes, I could hardly believe my eyes. So, might I ask about the data analysis? Is it true? Did the Blue Knight really move before I fired?"

Fasta had taken a support computer on her mission that recorded her every

move and various other data. Analyzing that would determine whether or not Fasta's hunch was right.

"How about it, operator?" Ralgwin asked, turning to another subordinate in the room.

He himself was curious about the answer and waited patiently as the operator pulled up data from the mission for all to see.

"It's hard to believe... but it seems you were right, Fasta. The Blue Knight did indeed move before you fired."

By comparing the timestamp on the video footage against Fasta's firing record, it was objectively clear that Koutarou had acted before she pulled the trigger.

"What a monster... How are we supposed to beat him, then?" Fasta breathed.

If he'd moved when the shot was fired or immediately after, that would have been one thing... But Koutarou had actually *preempted* her fire. Only Fasta herself should have known when exactly she was going to pull the trigger. That wasn't the kind of thing you could intuit by looking at someone. Moreover, he shouldn't have even been able to see her from several kilometers away.

"Don't get ahead of yourself," Ralgwin cautioned. "We're talking about a legendary hero. This is the least he's capable of."

"But—"

"Just calm down, Fasta. Once we expose the secrets of his power, we'll be able to use it for ourselves."

In stark contrast to the stunned and dejected Fasta, Ralgwin seemed to be enjoying himself. The Blue Knight's mysterious powers had confounded him before, but he now felt like, bit by bit, he was getting closer to uncovering them. The spiritual energy stealth device was the first step in the right direction. So, in Ralgwin's eyes, this development was no discouragement. If anything, it was proof they needed to press forward.

"Well done, Fasta. Failure is not on your shoulders. You performed splendidly."

“Thank you...” Fasta conceded.

In truth, she was reluctant to take the praise. Her emotions were roiling inside of her. She felt like she was fighting a ghost. An impossible opponent.

“Our victory is only a matter of time. We have several options to explore,” Ralgwin declared.

“Really?”

“Heh heh heh... Just you watch. You will have cause for celebration soon enough.”

Indeed, unlike Fasta, Ralgwin felt he had the Blue Knight pegged. Regardless of what tricks he might have up his sleeve, he was only human. And thanks to Fasta’s mission, Ralgwin now had additional insight into his powers. Indeed, he thought, it was only a matter of time. A self-satisfied smirk crossed his lips accordingly.

Kiriha theorized that the enemy had made an attempt on Ruth’s life after identifying her as their highest-priority target. The remnants of Vandarion’s faction were their last holdout on Earth. They were now isolated from their main force, which had already surrendered in Forthorthe. Minor skirmishes were still taking place all over the galaxy, but there was no one to reinforce or resupply Ralgwin and his men in this distant corner of the universe. He was also cut off from his information network. That meant his greatest threat now was someone who had an advantage over him in terms of intelligence.

Without the support of the military, Ralgwin and his men were effectively reduced to a terrorist organization. They functioned on a relatively small scale and had to source all of their needs locally. Preparations for major attacks were extensive. They’d have to make strategic alliances with like-minded people while simultaneously keeping their interests in check with what limited supplies they had. Their entire operation could fall apart if someone stuck their nose where they shouldn’t... and that was exactly the kind of thing Ruth was good at.

She was a skilled remote intelligence operative who excelled at gathering, managing, and analyzing all kinds of information. Discovering the enemy’s trade networks, secret funds, information channels, close associates, or even their

base would be fatal for them. In other words, in a discreet battle like this, Ruth was their greatest adversary.

“Ruth’s skillset is all the more valuable in our current situation. If I were their leader, I would target her first as well,” Kiriha explained.

“You think too highly of me...” Ruth protested.

“Haha, hardly! It’s true that I have the best retainers in all the universe!” Theia declared proudly.

She was pleased—thrilled, even—and happily acted as though she’d been praised herself. Really, she was over the moon that her childhood friend had become such a valuable member of the team. But that wasn’t all. Theia was already coming up with plans to protect Ruth, too.

“There’s also the matter of that spiritual energy stealth device,” Clan added, quick to bring up the technical aspect of the problem at hand.

“What do you mean?” Theia asked.

“The stealth device Vandarion’s faction has is inferior to what the haniwas use, right?”

“Oh, that’s right. We did talk about that... Is it true, haniwas?”

“It’s antiquated, ho!”

“It’s outdated technology from several decades ago, ho!”

“See? That’s all the more reason to go after Pardomshiha—they want to level the playing field by weakening our intelligence network.”

Detecting and pursuing enemies was more than just a matter of having technology capable of doing so. They still needed a skilled operator capable of controlling the relevant devices and interpreting the information they provided. So if Vandarion’s faction was behind in terms of technology, the easiest way to get even with Elfaria’s faction was to take out their operator—Ruth.

“Now that you mention it, we’d be in a lot of trouble without her. Who would do all the shopping?” chimed in Sanae.

“Ruth-san is the only one who knows everything that’s in the fridge, too!”

added Yurika.

Their remarks were wholly unrelated, but it was indeed true that Ruth was responsible for managing food resources in the apartment. She was the best at it, after all. With so many people now coming and going from the apartment, keeping the kitchen stocked was quite a chore. A few days without her would be a disaster for room 106. Kiriha and Harumi would have to work double time together in order to pick up the slack.

“More importantly, this means Ruth-san needs to be guarded,” Koutarou said with a serious expression. “But so do Kiriha-san, Sakuraba-senpai, and our other brains.”

One of his worst fears was becoming reality. If the enemy intentionally targeted their key strategists and thinkers, their group would fall apart. They’d already come for Ruth, and Koutarou couldn’t bear to sit by when he knew more attacks would likely be coming. Kiriha, Harumi, and Clan weren’t the only ones at risk, either. Taking them out would be an easy way to paralyze the group, but in truth, all of the girls were in danger. So Koutarou felt that there was a need to rethink and strengthen their defenses.

“Heehee...”

Hearing his concerns, Ruth couldn’t help smiling. She understood his feelings better than anyone because they’d been connected during the attack earlier, and Koutarou’s desire to protect Ruth was now projected onto everyone. It was a wonderful thing. It had kept her calm and hopeful even when her life was in danger, and she was happy to share that joy with the other girls.

“Ooh! I have an idea!” piped up Shizuka as she raised her hand. She shared Koutarou’s concerns, but had already come up with a plan. “Why don’t we pair off, brains and brawns?”

They would still have to iron out the details of their new defenses, but they couldn’t do anything in the meantime without basic precautions. That was why Shizuka was petitioning a buddy system, pairing up the stronger members of the group with the weaker ones so that no one was ever alone and unprotected.

“On top of that, whenever we go anywhere open that a sniper attack might

be a possibility, we need to equip military-grade barriers. If possible, I'd like protection against spiritual energy and magic too," Theia suggested.

A sudden ambush was one thing, but not even she could defend against continuous heavy fire. They'd need adequate preparations in advance, for they'd need them at a moment's notice if it came to that.

"We shouldn't go anywhere unless we have to until official defensive arrangements are made," Harumi added—a cautious plan true to her careful nature.

"To summarize, then, as of today, you should never be alone, you should always carry a barrier with you, and you shouldn't go out unless you really need to," Maki concluded, reviewing the points everyone had made thus far.

There was a limit to what the group could accomplish on their own, but these basic measures were better than nothing while they pooled resources and made other plans.

"Yeah. Most importantly, no going off on your own for some inexplicable reason like they do in horror movies," Koutarou cautioned, specifically looking at the more careless girls in the group.

"I've always wondered why they do that! Someone always goes alone even though it's dangerous," Sanae said with an emphatic nod.

In reality, however, she was one of the girls Koutarou was most worried about. She could be impulsive and often let her emotions get the better of her. She might even run off on her own without realizing what she'd done.

"It's just that kind of story," Yurika explained. "Nothing happens otherwise."

Incidentally, she was the other girl Koutarou was extremely worried about. She was even worse than Sanae in terms of keeping her wits about her. Koutarou could easily imagine her getting lost and ending up alone. Everyone—aside from Sanae and Yurika herself—agreed they'd have to keep an eye on her.

"Shizuka will be fine on her own. I am constantly protecting her, after all."

"But her weight would skyrocket if you had to stop a bullet from an anti-material rifle, wouldn't it?" Koutarou asked.

“I don’t want that!” Shizuka shrieked.

The sniping incident created ripples for Koutarou and the girls—ripples that started small, but would ultimately become great waves. Koutarou foresaw the rough waters ahead of them and thus decided to take matters into his own hands before it was too late. He believed that Ruth was a priority target because he and the other girls relied too heavily on her extraordinary abilities. She’d accomplished a great deal for them and, as a result, stood out even to the enemy. If he tried just a little more himself, he thought, perhaps he could distract the enemy’s attention. As for how he intended to do that...

“Clan, I’d like to learn how to use a Forthorthian computer.”

His first idea was to learn Forthorthian technology for himself. He at least wanted to learn enough that he could relieve some of the burden on Ruth and allow her to focus her attention on other things like defending herself.

“What’s this all of a sudden, Veltlion?”

“Ruth-san’s being targeted because she handles all of our intelligence, right?”

“Well, that much is true.”

Clan was also an integral part of their intelligence network, but her specialties were primarily decryption and hacking. Ruth handled virtually everything else, so she couldn’t argue with Koutarou’s assessment.

“So the more I can do, the safer Ruth-san will be.”

“That’s... pretty insightful coming from you.”

Clan glanced down and then smiled at Koutarou. She didn’t know if Koutarou could actually do any of Ruth’s work for her—she was just that amazing with a computer. But Koutarou clearly wanted to help, and Clan couldn’t deny his goodwill. There was always a chance he might surprise her. The vacuum tube in her hands was proof of that.

“But listen, Clan, I don’t want to get in the way of your work. I came to ask if you know anyone who could teach me.”

Koutarou had considered asking Clan at first. She certainly knew her way

around a computer, but she was terribly busy. Ever since diplomatic relations had been established between Earth and Forthorthe, she'd been serving as a technical advisor on Forthorthe's side. So, out of deference to her workload, Koutarou simply came to see if she knew anyone who would be good for the job.

"Someone to teach you computers? Hold on..."

Clan did a quick search for qualified candidates and scrutinized the results with a serious expression. A list of names and faces was scrolling down her screen.

"I'm serious, Clan, so I'm counting on—"

"I'll teach you, Master."

Just then, Ruth herself entered the room and volunteered to take on the job. Ruth was always reserved, so it was rare for her to speak up so—and even rarer for her to interject herself in a conversation like this.

"I don't want to put any more of a burden on you, Ruth-san."

Her offer was generous, but given that Ruth's circumstances weren't much different from Clan's, Koutarou couldn't bring himself to accept.

"I *will* teach you, Master," she said with a smile.

It was no different from the same gentle smile she always wore, but Koutarou could feel an unusual determination behind it. There was also something compelling about the extra emphasis she'd used.

"I-If you'd be so kind..."

Overwhelmed by the strange force coming from Ruth, Koutarou found himself nodding in agreement. He still had reservations about this plan, but he was now powerless to object.

Everyone's Intentions

Monday, May 30th

Before Elfaria became the empress of Forthorthe, she'd made her name for herself as an archeologist. One of her greatest achievements was rediscovering and breeding a plant thought to be extinct—Rubustori. The tea made from its leaves was historically known to be Empress Alaia's favorite, and thanks to Elfaria, the drink was now known and loved throughout all Forthorthe.

"I feel so relaxed whenever I drink this tea," Nana commented, returning her cup to its saucer.

She smiled at Elfaria across the table. Elfaria was the one who'd brewed the pot, and the two of them were subsequently in the middle of afternoon tea together.

"Even the legendary Empress Alaia drank it for exactly that reason," she explained with a smile of her own.

Nana looked so young and Elfaria so mature that when they smiled at each other like this, they almost looked like a fond mother and daughter together. If someone had pointed that out, Elfaria would have gotten mad while Nana simply would have laughed. She enjoyed Elfaria's personality and her company very much.

"I see. Even the Silver Princess enjoyed this tea, huh?"

"Yes, though it seems Theia cares nothing for it."

"My, my..."

Nana and Elfaria made a point of having tea like this every so often, first and foremost, to take a break from work. Nana was in Forthorthe as a diplomat from Folsaria. Elfaria knew nothing of the ways of magic and the people who practiced it, so Nana had a lot to explain to her. Tea breaks were simply a way to punctuate their long, frequent conversations.

“I wonder how Princess Theiamillis and Princess Clan are doing now...”

When the topic turned to Theia, Nana couldn't help thinking about Earth. Elfaria narrowed her eyes and flashed a warm, motherly smile.

“I'm sure they're having a tough time, but I'm also sure they're making the best of it.”

Even with the fastest spaceship, Earth was a ten-day trip from Forthorthe. Nana and Elfaria could thus only speculate about what the kids were up to. Earth and Forthorthe were going through a lot right now, after all. Forthorthe had established diplomatic relations with Japan, and there was much to be sorted out when the two cultures collided. Theia and Clan were largely in charge of navigating those challenges, which inevitably meant they were both insanely busy. Yet even so, Elfaria wasn't worried. She knew Koutarou was with them and that he would keep them safe. She was as sure of him as she was the rising sun.

“You seem to think quite highly of Satomi-san, Your Majesty.”

Elfaria hadn't said it out loud, but Nana could feel it strongly based on the way she talked about him.

“But of course. He's saved Forthorthe twice now.”

“And you too, right?”

“Yes. That's why I'm not worried. As long as the children can enjoy themselves, I think everything will be fine.”

“So to you, Your Majesty, Satomi-san is...”

Nana trailed off there. Saying the rest out loud would only trouble Elfaria.

“What is it?” she asked.

“It's nothing, Your Majesty. I was simply thinking Satomi-kun is like a safety net.”

“Heehee... I do count on him to take care of my daughter and the others.”

That was why Nana ended up saying something else instead. Life was complicated. Sometimes things didn't go according to plan, and sometimes

there were questions better left unasked.

“But... it’s the same for you too, isn’t it, Nana-san?”

“Indeed. Satomi-san is the person I can entrust with Yurika-chan.”



Elfaria and Nana continued to chat for a while after that. Just as they were preparing to wrap things up and get back to work, a third party entered the room.

“Apologies for interrupting you, Your Majesty.”

“Oh, I don’t mind, Ceilēshu-san. What brings you here, though? Is something the matter?”

Ceilēshu was the first princess of Forthorthe who’d served as regent in Elfaria’s absence during the civil war. She’d gone home to spend time with her sick father for a while afterward, but had since returned to the palace to act as Elfaria’s assistant while he convalesced.

“Nothing serious, but there is a matter that requires your attention,” she explained.

“Well, Nana-san, it sounds like I must go for now...”

“Actually, I’d like to invite Nana-san to listen in as well. This concerns Earth and Folsaria too.”

“Is that so?” asked Nana with interest.

“Then have a seat, Ceilēshu-san,” implored Elfaria. “We can talk right here.”

“Thank you... Pardon again for the intrusion.”

Ceilēshu took a free seat at the table and began tapping away on her bracelet. As she did, Elfaria poured tea for all three of them.

“Here you are, Ceilēshu-san,” she said, handing a cup to the princess.

“Thank you very much, Your Majesty. Now, please allow me to get straight to it,” Ceilēshu said, getting down to business without even trying Elfaria’s tea.

This, of course, was a matter of some importance. But in truth, Ceilēshu had a hard time with hot drinks.

“I’d like to start off with a report on the remnants of Vandarion’s faction,” she continued.

“Did something happen on Earth?!” Nana asked immediately, leaning in with a sharp look.

Since Ceilēshu had mentioned the issue at hand concerned both Earth and Folsaria, Nana was rightly worried.

“No, not this time,” Ceilēshu assured her. “This is about the remnants in Forthorthe.”

“I see... Sorry for interrupting you,” Nana apologized and sat back in her seat.

“Don’t worry. I understand your concern.”

Ceilēshu knew why Nana was worried. She wasn’t the only one who had friends far away, after all, so she was quite sympathetic. She didn’t mind the interruption at all and kept going quite naturally.

“The disarmament of Vandarion’s main force is proceeding as planned.”

The decisive battle of Forthorthe’s civil war had taken place over the course of New Year’s Eve on Earth. Following Vandarion’s defeat, the majority of his army surrendered and had spent the past few months in the disarmament process. It had taken so long simply because of the sheer scale of the job; as Ceilēshu had reported, there hadn’t been any hiccups along the way.

“As for the smaller skirmishes still ongoing throughout the empire...”

Lately, Elfaria and Ceilēshu had been discussing what to do about the remnants of Vandarion’s faction that continued to fight. With Vandarion and Granado gone, their chain of command was essentially broken. That meant any leftover forces were essentially rogue, doing as they pleased in small groups still held together by charismatic commanders.

The holdouts close to the capital were taken out quickly, but the ones farther away in different solar systems were harder to pin down. As its name suggested, the Holy Forthorthe Galactic Empire spanned an entire galaxy. There were plenty of independent economic blocs far from the Forthorthian solar system. Because Forthorthe’s domain was so vast, it was difficult to enforce rule in the farthest reaches of the galaxy. These small holdout forces were taking advantage of that.

“However, the majority of them have still been checked.”

“I’d heard that Nefilforan-san was putting a great deal of effort into this

endeavor, but these results are better than I hoped for.”

“Indeed. Just this month, she’s reclaimed eight bases. This includes her travel times as well, so I believe she’s making remarkable progress.”

Logically speaking, the small holdout forces weren’t large enough to cause any real trouble in the grand Forthorthian empire. But as a matter of principle, Forthorthe couldn’t abide treasonous forces taking up residence in its territory. The majority of the Forthorthian army, however, was still busy handling the disarmament of Vandarion’s main force. That had left Nefilforan and the troops under her command to handle the remaining rebels.

“Nefilforan? Isn’t that…”

Nana had heard the name before, but not in a military capacity. She was accordingly quite puzzled. Elfaria, however, smiled and happily explained.

“Yes, the fifth princess from the Glendad family. She’s a regimental commander known as the Piercing Greatspear.”

Her full name was Nefilforan Canon Glendad Aldousine Forthorthe. The Glendad family had always excelled in military arts. In fact, it had historically produced more generals than emperors. Nefilforan was just one step short of becoming a general herself. She was an icon of Forthorthian valor. She’d been trained in the art of war since she was a child and proudly upheld her family’s long-standing reputation.

As her title suggested, she specialized in spears. Traditionally, Forthorthian women took to polearms on the battlefield to overcome their height disadvantage against male opponents. Nefilforan took that to the extreme; her favored weapon was the massive greatspear. It was easy for a normal fighter to be thrown around by the momentum of such an incredible weapon, but not Nefilforan. She was tough and trained to be even tougher. Unlike a natural prodigy like Theia, Nefilforan was a master who’d built up her skills through sheer hard work.

And as a princess of a technologically advanced empire, Nefilforan didn’t wield just any greatspear. Hers was equipped with all kinds of functions—like electric charges and laser beams—that allowed her to adapt to all manner of combat situations. The Glendad family had even developed martial arts

specifically to capitalize on such functions. Even as an expert in close combat, Nefilforan would never lose out at range. As a royal family, the Glendads refused to be overshadowed by any average knight. They often competed with Wenrankan soldiers, loftily known as the strongest of the knights.

“But she didn’t appear during the civil war, did she?” asked Nana.

“That’s because of the Glendads’ background. Until Vandarion’s conspiracy was exposed, they were forced to side with the military,” Elfaria explained.

Because the Glendad family had produced generations of generals, they were deeply entrenched in the top brass of the military. That had left the Glendads split on whether they should side with the military or Elfaria. Favor generally leaned toward the military, as the Glendad family was against Elfaria’s disarmament policies. It wasn’t until Ceilēshu became regent that they were finally able to make up their minds, which was why they were largely uninvolved in the civil war.

“Tying the Glendads’ hands was probably part of Vandarion’s strategy,” the empress continued.

“In that sense... my father’s sickness was also a convenient way for Vandarion to keep the Sarioon family out of things,” added Ceilēshu.

Her full name was Ceilēshu Kua Sarioon Falcmuse Forthorthe. Her personal name, Falcmuse, meant “the blossoming season.” The Sarioon family was accomplished in the arts and had produced as many rulers as the Mastirs and Schweigers. Politically speaking, they were centrist and well regarded for being able to strike a good balance. That was why no one had objected to Ceilēshu acting as empress in Elfaria’s absence.

Ceilēshu’s father had always upheld the good Sarioon family name, but he was recently stricken with illness that kept him confined. Vandarion took that opportunity to make his move, but ultimately DKI intervened and Ceilēshu was installed as regent. And more recently, Ceilēshu’s father was now recovering. Koutarou and company had made good on their promise to see to it that he was taken care of with the best magic and spiritual energy technology had to offer.

“I suppose the Glendads, then, are interested in making up for their lack of showing in war,” Nana postulated.

When Forthorthe was gripped in the clutches of civil war, its most valiant royal family was nowhere to be seen. Moreover, their rival family of Wenranka had been quick to take Elfaria's side. That now spurred them to action, which was why they'd sent the pride and joy of their family—the young Nefilforan.

"I believe so. On top of that, the Glendads are just as fastidious as you'd expect. Being fooled by Vandarion is a humiliation they won't soon forget. I'm sure they also feel obliged for having doubted me," clarified Elfaria.

Nefilforan's achievements were great and many on their own, but her family pulled out all the stops to support her. In a sense, they were especially bitter against the remnants of Vandarion's faction and thus were all too happy to see every last holdout eliminated. It was personal.

"I see. They have no choice but to put up a good fight now," Nana said with an exaggerated nod.

The gesture looked childish, but in truth, Nana was a genius magician who had a good sense for politics. She understood exactly what Nefilforan had to prove, and why Elfaria was letting her carry on this way. It was advantageous for both parties—Nana could extrapolate that much, and it was such keen insight that had earned her a job as Folsaria's emissary.

"But now that all major strongholds have been subdued, Nefilforan has no current objective," explained Ceilēshu.

All the enemy forces of considerable size had been taken care of at this point. There were still smaller groups afoot, but they had gone underground and struck like terrorists. Rooting them out wasn't Nefilforan's expertise; that would be a matter for a different force altogether.

"Hmm... So this is why you came to consult with us, Ceilēshu-san?" asked Elfaria.

"Yes, Your Majesty. We need to decide how best to use the Glendad forces now that the majority of the remaining rebel threat have been eliminated."

"We'll need to leave soldiers stationed in every region, even if that means sending some of our own men..."

It had been months since the end of the civil war, but life had yet to return to

normal in Forthorthe thanks to the remnants of Vandarion's faction lurking in the shadows. They were still apt to use guerrilla warfare, which was why Elfaria believed a military watch was still necessary throughout the galaxy for the civilians' safety.

"In every region, you say?" inquired Nana.

She'd sensed special meaning in Elfaria's choice of words, and Elfaria couldn't help replying with a smile.

"Why, yes. I was thinking of sending Nefilforan-san to Earth."

"To Earth?!"

"The remnants of Vandarion's faction on Earth are after magic and spiritual energy technology. I believe Nefilforan-san's strength would be a great boon in stopping them."

Elfaria thought it would be best to keep the battle on Earth short and sweet. If Vandarion's faction managed to make off with even a little magic or spiritual energy tech and bring it back to Forthorthe, it would be a political nightmare. Making sure that didn't happen—in other words, stopping them before they could do it—would be critical. The best way to accomplish that was to strike their stronghold directly, and the best way to accomplish that was to send Nefilforan.

"Then I'd like to ask you to be her guide, Nana-san," said Ceilēshu.

"I suspected you might say as much, Princess Ceilēshu... You did say this concerned Earth and Folsaria, after all."

"As perceptive as ever, Nana-san."

As sudden as it was, Nana was in favor of the idea. Striking hard and fast would keep casualties to a minimum. Thus, she readily agreed to the plan.

Koutarou's lessons on Forthorthian computers began the day after Ruth demanded the job of teaching him. In addition to Koutarou, Harumi, Maki, and Shizuka all decided to participate too. Kiriha had already learned how to use them on her own, while Sanae and Yurika gave it their best effort... but gave up

on the first day.

“Ruth-san, could you explain permissions to me? I’m not sure I get all this...” Koutarou asked hesitantly.

“Leave it to me, Master! First, just think of the people who use Blue Knight’s computer!” Ruth responded in a sing-song voice.

“Let’s see... You, me, Theia, and Clan from time to time, right? There’s also Elle, who installed all those tricks on it. I guess it goes in for imperial servicing sometimes too, right?”

“And who can do anything they want with Blue Knight?”

“Well, seeing as how she loaded it up with cheats... Elle?”

“That’s right! Her Majesty has the highest level of authority on the ship! She’s been involved with Blue Knight since the blueprint stage, so no one understands it better than she does! She’s also the empress, of course, so she can do whatever she wants with the ship! That’s why she has master permissions!”

“Huh? Don’t I have those too?”

“Yes, Master! But you don’t know the ship like she does!”

“Well... that’s true enough.”

“That’s why the AI confirms all of your input before it obeys, Master!”

“Now that you mention it, it *is* always complaining...”

“In other words, you have master permissions with AI support!”

“So I have Elle’s account with training wheels on, huh?”

“Yes, that’s right! As for Her Highness—”

Ruth was genuinely excited about her teaching role. She’d prepared textbooks, actual computer lessons, and other aides on a device with a smartphone-style interface so it would be easy for Koutarou and the others to use.



“Ruth really is enjoying this, isn’t she?” Theia observed from afar.

She’d remarked that Ruth was enjoying herself, but the truth was that Theia was enjoying herself too. She was happy to see Ruth so motivated and engaged, especially because she was ordinarily so reserved.

“I’m sure she’s just happy to be of use to Veltlion.”

Clan, on the other hand, didn’t look happy at all. She was jealous that Koutarou was being so open and honest with Ruth. Realizing this, Kiriha gave her a soft smile.

“There’s no doubt that Satomi Koutarou is learning how to use computers for Ruth’s sake. Her beloved is working hard on her behalf, and she’s able to help him do it. Can you blame her for being in such high spirits?”

Ruth would likely be frantically embarrassed if she overheard what the girls were talking about, but fortunately, their conversation never reached her ears. For today’s lesson, Ruth was using the Hazy Moon’s conference room as a classroom. It was a big enough space that the girls not participating were set up in the back enjoying some tea while the others worked.

“Ruth-san was almost killed. I’m just happy to see her happy,” chimed in Yurika.

In truth, this wasn’t the first attempt on Ruth’s life. It was her first run-in with a sniper, however, and particularly distressing. Almost being murdered in the middle of town in broad daylight would have taken its toll on anyone. But the fact that it wasn’t keeping her from smiling now was a relief to everyone.

“It was still scary for her, though. So we should let her have her fun for now,” added Sanae.

That much was true. Even though Ruth looked happy now, she was deeply shaken by what had happened. Sanae knew that better than anyone because she could read her aura. She and the other girls would have to give her the appropriate space and time to heal.

Ruth’s computer lessons always lasted an hour. She believed that studying

should be done at a proper pace and without cramming too much in. Today was no exception, so she readily concluded her lesson at the one-hour mark.

“We’ll pick up with this tomorrow.”

“Thanks again for taking time out of your busy schedule, Ruth-san...”

“Oh, it’s nothing.”

When class time was over, things went back to normal with the group. Ruth was a little sorry to see the lesson end, but was all smiles again soon enough. She had tomorrow’s lesson to prepare for, after all. She’d get to have fun again then.

“Well, if you’ll all excuse me!” Ruth declared, practically skipping out of the conference room humming.

Her students saw her off, but one of them looked concerned.

“This might have been a mistake...”

Koutarou alone folded his arms pensively. Maki observed this quizzically. Ruth seemed to be enjoying herself, so she didn’t understand what the problem was.

“Satomi-kun, is something wrong?”

“I feel like all I ever do is make more work for Ruth-san...”

Koutarou was bothered by the fact that he’d made more work for Ruth when his original goal was the exact opposite. He’d just wanted to learn from a specialist, but Ruth had insisted on taking the job herself. Not only was there the time she actually devoted to teaching him, but also the time she had to spend preparing lessons. In the end, his attempt to lessen her burden had only increased it. That bothered him immensely.

“I don’t know about that. Ruth’s been in a great mood lately. I think it’s done wonders for her,” Theia interjected with a smile.

Ruth was always thoughtful, but that made her a bit of a worrier because she tended to dwell on the details. She hadn’t spent any time fretting as of late, however, because she was having so much fun. Thanks to that, she was even sleeping better.

“She’s been so efficient lately too that her workload effectively hasn’t increased much.”

Ruth’s detail-oriented nature showed in her work, as she spent more time than necessary on each and every task. But Theia had noticed she was doing a better job of managing herself lately, which improved her overall performance. These computer lessons had shaken up her routine and given her a reason to reexamine her schedule. It was true that the lessons took time, but Ruth enjoyed preparing and giving them as much as any hobby.

“Even so, I wanted to lower our risk of sniper attacks and the like... And this situation’s not helping with that at all.”

Koutarou’s real motive for learning Forthorthian computers was protecting Ruth. She was a high-priority target because Koutarou and the others relied so heavily on her talents. He’d thought he might be able to take some of the heat off of her by sharing her work burdens, but that had backfired. This was extremely vexing to Koutarou, and Harumi could see it on his face.

“Calm down, Satomi-kun,” she implored.

“Sakuraba-senpai?”

“I’m sure Ruth-san finds it reassuring that you noticed and that you’re doing your part to help her.”

“Do you really think so?”

He considered his plan a failure, so it was hard to see it from Harumi’s perspective. He wasn’t convinced.

“If not, Ruth-san wouldn’t be smiling like she is, now would she?”

“You have a point, but...”

Koutarou could tell that Ruth was indeed enjoying herself, but that wasn’t enough in his book. He still wanted to protect her.

“We just have to accept that, in the short-term, we won’t be of any real help to her, Satomi-kun.”

Harumi gently narrowed her eyes. In truth, she felt the same way Koutarou did. She was bothered that she couldn’t do anything for Ruth when she was in

such danger. But she hadn't given up hope.

"Sakuraba-senpai..."

"Ruth-san's just too special. We can study all we want, but that still won't be enough to relieve her burden."

Koutarou and the girls doing what they could over time would ultimately only reduce Ruth's workload by a meager 1 percent. She was simply that skilled. Ruth knew that, but she was still happy Koutarou and the others wanted to help her. That was enough for her.

"All we can do right now is give Ruth-san our support. Learning computers is one way of doing that. She's having fun, you know? So even if we're not actually helping much, that's worth something. I'm sure she's felt the same way about you all this time."

The nature of their fight had only changed very recently, and prior to this, Ruth had been dependent on Koutarou without being able to offer much in return. Now that she had her chance to shine, Harumi thought, they'd really just traded places.

"Ruth-san felt the same way...?"

Koutarou finally understood. Ruth had been so fixated on being vice captain, there was no way feeling helpless *hadn't* bothered her. She didn't have the same kind of fighting talent Theia did, nor did she have Kiriha's knack for strategy. She couldn't make robots or use magic or manipulate spiritual energy. She was an ace with unmanned fighters, but she'd never been able to stand by Koutarou's side in battle. That was why she'd always been desperate to find something she could do, and she felt a special solidarity seeing Koutarou go through the same thing now.

"Once we get more staff in the fall, there will be less of a burden on Ruth-san anyway. So please continue supporting her until then, Satomi-kun."

They were expecting another wave of Forthorthian exchange students and personnel in the fall, meaning their resources would increase exponentially. That would naturally reduce Ruth's workload, so it was only a matter of time. Most of the reason she was so busy now was simply because the Forthorthian

embassy was short-staffed. But that would only be the case until fall, so Koutarou and the other girls just needed to help her hold out until then.

“And if we continue to study, we’ll be able to help her out more in the long run.”

“You’re right. We just need to face facts and do what we can for now... I’ll give it my best shot.”

“Good!”

In his fervent desire to protect Ruth, Koutarou had believed he needed to do something extraordinary for her. But Harumi set him straight on that front. As a result, his respect for her reached a new level. She was like a splendid princess capable of showing others the way, just as Alaia had.

“Don’t worry so much, Veltlion. I’ll prepare an AI to assist you. That way you should be able to help Pardomshiha at least a little.”

Artificial intelligence was far more advanced in Forthorthe than on Earth, so there were already AIs built for instruction and support. With the right one, even an amateur like Koutarou could use a computer with relative proficiency. Clan thought that would help him pick up speed in the early stages of learning until he got the hang of computers for himself. Clan could throw the AI together in a snap, but she’d need some time to teach it about special operations for Blue Knight and the Hazy Moon.

Koutarou, however, was strangely silent at her offer.

“What’s the matter?” she asked.

“I was just thinking that I should actually be doing what I can to lessen your burden too...”

Ruth was one thing, but Harumi, Clan, and Kiriha also did a lot of heavy lifting for the group that no one was capable of helping them with. They too needed all the support they could get as they anxiously awaited more personnel in the fall. Until then, Koutarou and the others would just have to do what they could, however small and indirect it might be. Koutarou’s gaze naturally turned to the three girls on his mind. They were all smiles now, but he knew how much pressure they were under.

No, it's not just them... Sanae, Yurika, Theia, and even Aika-san and Landlord-san too...

Koutarou then turned to look at all the girls. When it came to being irreplaceable, they all held a special place in his heart. He wanted to reduce the burden on all of them so that they could live out their lives in peace.

“My, that’s unusually gallant of you.”

“Idiot, I’m being serious here—”

“Incoming!”

Wham!

“Wh-Whoa!”

Koutarou was interrupted by a sudden impact that came at him from behind. He reached out for a nearby desk to keep himself upright.

“Hey!”

It was none other than Sanae, who was now hanging off of him with her arms slung around his neck. She quickly climbed up his back and forced him to carry her.

“Listen, it’s dangerous to jump on me like that with no warning!”

Sanae climbing on Koutarou was an everyday occurrence, so he wasn’t mad about that part. He was only complaining because she’d almost knocked him over. Sanae, however, was giggling nonetheless.

“Eeheehee, I’m just the type of person to jump into action when it’s necessary.”

“What are you talking about? What’s necessary?”

“This, silly.”

“Seriously, what are you talking about? What does that even mean?”

“It doesn’t matter! I just gotta do it!” she declared as she clung to him even tighter and pressed her face against his.

Her senses told her that this was necessary. The reason or meaning truly

didn't matter. She simply did what she felt she had to.



“Oh...”

“Hmm...”

“I see...”

And if Sanae thought it was necessary, so did the other girls. When she was flaunting it like this in front of them, they all got the message. Koutarou was the only one left in the dark, which would cause him a bit of trouble yet.

When Ruth returned to the conference room with haniwas in tow, she witnessed Koutarou and Theia jump off the ground at the same time. They flew toward each other in the air in a grand flourish.

“You good for nothing knight!”

“Shut it, you washboard!”

“Master?”

“Huh? Oh, Ruth-san—”

Wham!

While Koutarou was distracted, Theia landed her kick directly to his face and sent him rolling across the conference room. It killed all the momentum to her jump, allowing her to land gracefully on the floor as the clear victor. The haniwas bounded over to the defeated Koutarou and hopped up on top of him.

“Big Brother loses, ho!”

“Ho! Why were you even fighting?”

“No particular reason... Just bored, I guess?”

“That’s awful. You know that, right? You should treat a lady better,” scolded Theia.

“A-Anyway, Ruth-san! What can we do for you?” Koutarou called, swiftly trying to change the subject.

He knew arguing with Theia was a bad idea, but he was also genuinely curious what had brought Ruth back to the conference room. Ordinarily, she would

keep working until it was time to make dinner.

“I’ll allow the haniwas to explain,” she said.

“Ho! It’s bad, ho!”

“Maguz... Kasumi Raiga has contacted us, ho!”

Kasumi Raiga was the leader of the underground dwellers’ radical faction. He’d ultimately lost to the conservatives, and was thus stripped of his power and placed under house arrest until his punishment was formally decided. The very same man, however, now wanted to parley with Koutarou and company. As soon as they’d gotten the report, the haniwas had dropped their RC cars and come running over to the Hazy Moon.

Kasumi Raiga

Monday, May 30th

Maguz, or Kasumi Raiga, was not a name casually spoken among Koutarou and company. He was the former leader of the People of the Earth's radical faction, which was responsible for the fierce battle against the conservatives. Their conflict had only been resolved at the end of last year, so Koutarou and the girls still had their guard up.

"What's he up to now?" Koutarou asked Kiriha as he flipped over a tatami mat in room 106.

Beneath this particular mat—the one closest to the entrance—was a tunnel that led to the underground.

"In surface terms, he's been detained and is awaiting trial," Kiriha explained.

"Ah, of course. They can't try the ringleader until everyone else has had their day in court."

In blunt terms, Raiga's fate was already sealed. As the chief orchestrator of the civil war, he would almost certainly be punished by death. His cooperation, however, was critical for wading through the sentencing of the other radical faction members. The court was relying on Raiga to distinguish between who'd willingly joined his cause and who had been coerced into it. The former were felons while the latter were victims, and the underground would treat them accordingly. That was why Raiga's own trial had been postponed.

"That's right. His testimony is what will give us the bigger picture, so to speak."

As the mastermind of the entire operation, there were things only Raiga knew. The underground was still picking his brain in order to understand the full extent of his machinations. As such, they couldn't get rid of him just yet. If they executed him now, his mysteries would die with him.

“But now that he’s calling on us...”

“Indeed. We should hurry. I don’t know if this is a good or bad thing, but either way, I’m certain it’s important.”

Koutarou pulled the lever to open the hatch beneath the tatami. Below was a concrete corridor—a tunnel leading to the underground world. As a cold draft swept up from the now-open passageway, Koutarou looked over to Kotori and Nalfa.

“Kin-chan and Nalfa-san, please wait here. There’s no reason for you to get involved in this.”

Koutarou was planning to head down with the girls, excluding Kotori and Nalfa. Neither of them had any business with the underground, so Koutarou thought it would only endanger them to drag them along. Kotori, however, seemed to have her own ideas.

“Kou-niisan, you don’t—”

She was worried about Koutarou. She didn’t know him as the kind of guy who got involved in intrigue like this. Indeed, as far as she was concerned, he should be staying behind too. She was afraid that something terrible was going to happen sooner or later.

“I’m glad you’re worried about me, but this is personal. I can’t just let it be,” he explained calmly.

The People of the Earth were descendants of Maxfern’s alchemists who’d been banished to Earth because Koutarou and Clan used a Super Space-time Repulsion Shell on them in past Forthorthe. Because of that, he felt responsible for the position they were in now. He couldn’t just write it off and let Kiriha handle it. Like he said, it was personal.

“...Kou-niisan...”

Even after learning Koutarou was a hero and seeing it for herself, it hadn’t really sunk in for Kotori. Koutarou still seemed like the same boy he’d always been. He pushed people away from time to time, and Kotori knew deep down that was his way of protecting his broken heart. Yet this... This was different. Koutarou was telling her to stay behind not to push her away, but to keep her

safe. For her own good. It was incredibly vexing.

“Nalfa-san, take care of Kin-chan.”

“Layous-sama... Yes, of course! Please be careful”

As a Forthorthian, Nalfa was in a slightly different position. She naturally viewed Koutarou as a hero—as the Blue Knight—and thus there was nothing strange about seeing him march into battle or brave unknown dangers. Yet recently, something had started to change. Now that she’d gotten to know him, doubts similar to Kotori’s were budding in her heart. Because they had yet to fully blossom, however, she was still able to see him off with an earnest smile.

“Hahaha, don’t worry. There’s no guarantee this’ll come to a fight.”

Koutarou flashed a smile at the two girls before hopping down into the tunnel without hesitation. He looked resolved and mighty... just like a legendary hero. It was a wonderful thing, but Kotori and Nalfa were both unsure the look suited the Koutarou they knew personally.

Sanae could read other people’s emotions in their auras. As such, she knew that Kotori and Nalfa were concerned about Koutarou, and that he was concerned about them in turn. And so she called out to him in a reserved fashion—at least, reserved for Sanae.

“Say, Koutarou...”

“Yeah?”

“You totally could have brought them with us, you know.”

“Two years ago, back when it was just us fighting, I might have.”

Koutarou and the invaders used to fight each other tooth and nail, but they stopped just short of killing each other. Clan and Maki didn’t necessarily have that reserve at first, but they still avoided doing things that made them stand out. As time passed and their opponents changed, however... Koutarou and the girls now found themselves in a situation where their enemies wouldn’t hesitate to kill to accomplish their objectives. They used any means necessary. That meant even an innocent Forthorthian transfer student and Koutarou’s childhood friends were at risk. That was why Koutarou wanted Nalfa and Kotori

to stay behind under the protection of Forthorthian and Folsarian guards watching the apartment.

“That’s fair... Sorry.”

“You’re being awfully meek today, Sanae.”

“They’re just so serious about how they feel. I wanted to help.”

“So even little Sanae’s matured some too, huh?”

“It’s bound to happen over two years. Even my boobs have gotten bigger!”

“That side of you is still childish, huh? But we’re getting off track here.”

Nalfa and Kotori continued to weigh on Koutarou’s mind, but he didn’t have time to chat casually about anything extraneous. Right now, he needed to focus on the problem at hand. Sanae understood that too, so she fell quiet as Koutarou turned to Kiriha.

“Do you think Raiga has connections to Ralgwin and the other remnants of Vandarion’s faction?” he asked.

That possibility was the reason they were in such a hurry to get underground. In the worst case scenario, Raiga and Ralgwin were already working together. Ever since Raiga had asked to parley, Koutarou couldn’t shake the bad feeling he was getting.

“The radical faction has been a little too quiet for that... but we can’t let our guard down,” Kiriha said, fighting back a wince.

It was on a far smaller scale than what happened in Forthorthe, but Raiga had led a coup d’etat of his own. Most of what remained of the radical faction had been disarmed, but just like in Forthorthe, there were still lingering holdouts. Kiriha was worried about the remnants of Vandarion’s faction getting in touch with the remnants of the radical faction, so she’d been paying close attention to their movements lately. Her biggest concern was what might happen if technology changed hands between the two.

She’d cast a wide net in anticipation of the factions attempting to make contact, but everything had been quiet so far. Raiga’s only communication had been sending word to Koutarou and Kiriha on the surface via his father, Kouma.

It seemed, then, that he and Ralgwin had yet to make each other's acquaintance... but Kiriha was still leery of the cautious and crafty Ralgwin. It was more than possible that he'd managed to slip through her surveillance net.

"If Raiga isn't connected to Ralgwin, why would he contact us?" Theia piped up to ask.

That point puzzled Koutarou and the others. If Raiga and Ralgwin were working together, this was most likely a trap. If they *weren't* working together, however, it hardly seemed there was any reason for Raiga to reach out to them at all.

"He is Kouma's only son, and before the coup d'etat I considered him a friend," Kiriha explained. "But in his eyes, I was the enemy. He only got close to me in order to facilitate his coup, so it's hard to imagine he's going to ask for forgiveness or anything else personal in nature."

Kiriha's family led the People of the Earth, and her father was the head of the conservative faction. That made Chief Daiha and Kiriha two of Raiga's main targets during the coup. Kiriha and Raiga knew each other through their fathers, as Kouma was Daiha's assistant, so they'd always been friendly with one another. When Raiga tried to have Kiriha killed, however, it was clear his kindness had all been an act.

"So, in essence, this is either a trap or some attempt at blackmail," Kiriha mused.

Even she wasn't entirely sure what was going on. It was hard to imagine that Ralgwin had secretly made contact with Raiga without her knowing and that they'd actually established enough cooperation to stage a trap like this. Kiriha's surveillance net included the best spiritual technology had to offer, so if Ralgwin was capable of slipping through it... then what did he even need to make contact with Raiga for?

"There's no point in speculating too much. Let's just go meet this Raiga guy and see what he has to say. Under the assumption that it's a trap and we'll be attacked, that is," suggested Shizuka.

The others agreed that was a wise plan. And so they decided they would meet with Raiga, but cautiously. He was an enemy, after all, so there was no harm in

playing it safe.

Koutarou knew Kasumi Kouma. They'd first met eleven years in the past, and then again last year during the civil war underground. When Maguz's identity was revealed, Kouma fell into a deep depression. His own son was the enemy mastermind, and he'd been none the wiser. In his grief, Kouma became so emaciated that he looked desperately ill... but it seemed he'd since recovered. He wasn't as lively as when Koutarou had first met him over a decade ago, but he now looked as energetic and healthy as he could be for his age.

"Uncle Kouma!"

"Kiriha-sama, I welcome you!"

When Kouma saw Kiriha, he couldn't help beaming. He'd taken care of Kiriha for a long time and thought of her much like his own granddaughter.

"Uncle, you've put on a little weight."

"You jest! Ever since you unraveled the mystery of the People of the Earth's origins, I've hardly had time to eat."

"Is that so? I'm sorry to work you so hard."

"Worry not. It's well worth it."

Kiriha also thought of Kouma as a grandfather. He was a guardian she could trust and a mentor who'd guided her down the road to leadership. He was every bit as important to her as Koutarou and Daiha were, so she too beamed when she saw him. After greeting Kiriha, Kouma turned to Koutarou and the others with a bow.

"Koutarou-sama, Theiamillis-sama, thank you as always for watching over Kiriha-sama."

"Hello, Kouma-san."

"I'm glad to see you in good health."

"A fine hello to the rest of your group as well. It's been some time."

Everyone returned Kouma's courteous bow. Since the decisive battle

underground, they'd all seen him from time to time at various meetings. Meetings had increased dramatically, however, ever since Forthorthe had established diplomatic relations with Earth. Koutarou and Theia in particular saw him on almost a weekly basis these days.

"Now, getting straight to the point, about the call we received..."

"Yes, let's save the more enjoyable chat for later."

Kouma would always pester Koutarou about when he was going to marry Kiriha whenever he had the chance. Today, however, he decided to spare the friendly antics. They had more important business to tend to, after all.

"This way then, everyone, if you please," Kouma said, beckoning them all into his mansion.

The Kasumis had served the Kuranos for generations, and their family home bespoke their storied history. They'd seen good times and bad, and that too was reflected in the design of their estate. Part of their basement, for example, doubled as prison. That was where Raiga was currently being held.

"The truth is that I don't know exactly what he's after myself," Kouma explained on the way. "All Raiga will say is that he wants to speak with you. I can't just ignore his request given what he's done... That's why I called you."

"You did the right thing, Uncle. The radical factions of the underground and Forthorthe working together is something we're all afraid of," Kiriha assured him.

The Kasumi estate was large, and it took three turns down a long corridor before they finally reached the stairs to the basement. Strategically, none of the most important facilities in the house were easy to reach from the main entrance, for safety reasons.

"Everyone... I humbly ask that, from this point forward, you keep your guard up," Kouma cautioned.

In spite of everything, Kouma still thought of Raiga as family. But to Kiriha and Koutarou, Kouma knew he was a dangerous enemy. It pained him to issue such a warning about his own son, but he couldn't risk endangering Kiriha and the others because of his personal biases.

“All right, everyone. Let’s do this.”

At Koutarou’s signal, the girls readied themselves with their various defenses. Drones, haniwas, magic, and psychic powers... It all seemed like extraordinary measures to meet with a single person, but Koutarou told the girls they could share a good laugh about it later if it turned out to be unnecessary. That would be a much better outcome than a more serious situation, which would be no laughing matter at all.

“We’re ready now, Satomi-kun,” announced Harumi, the last to finish her preparations.

Her ancient magic gave her great versatility in many situations, but her incantations took time. She’d cast several spells on the group and herself, the last of which gave her the ability to detect all sources of metal within the Kouma estate. It was a defensive measure that would allow her to get an early read on any ambushes or other attacks, given that most weapons were made out of metal.

“Okay... Then let’s go, Kouma-san.”

“Very well. Right this way.”

Kouma descended the basement stairs with an unusually stern look on his face. He still had no idea what his son was thinking, and now he’d brought Kiriha straight to him. He couldn’t imagine any situation more tense than this. Koutarou and the others followed close behind him. Perhaps Kouma’s nervousness was infectious, as they looked rather stern themselves.

The room where Raiga was imprisoned was a simple one. The prison itself was carved from bedrock over five hundred years ago, and it was fashioned with old, sturdy wooden bars. Tatami mats covered the floor. In the back was a small bathroom. There had been a few modern updates over the years, but the basic structure and feel of the room had remained unchanged all this time. Raiga was formally sitting in the middle of his cell, apparently awaiting his visitors.

“You came, daughter of Kurano.”

“It’s been a while, Raiga.”

Raiga and Kiriha looked at each other through the wooden bars. This was the first they'd seen one another since the coup d'état. They were fated to meet again at Raiga's trial, but that was likely still over a year away.

"I wasn't sure what expression I might find on your face, but it seems you haven't changed."

"I rose up knowing full well that I would face death should I fail. So, no, of course I haven't changed."

"That's the part that puzzles me, Raiga. Why did you ask to speak with us, then?"

"I understand your confusion. I *am* Maguz, after all."

Raiga seemed somewhat amused, an impression only strengthened by his smug expression and soft-spoken words. He rarely had the opportunity to speak with anyone in confinement, so there was a certain pleasure in seeing Kiriha, but most of all... he was surprised by his own actions. Calling Kiriha and her cohorts here felt strange, even to him. They were supposed to be enemies.

"In truth, I called you here because we share a common enemy now," he declared.

"What do you mean?" Koutarou asked.

"One of my visitors informed me that people from Forthorthe have made contact with our camp."

"From Forthorthe?!"

Koutarou couldn't help reacting to those words. He knew that Raiga's so-called camp was the radical faction, and, moreover, he knew that no Forthorthian emissary had contacted him in any official capacity. That could only mean one thing.

"Calm down. If I were going to come after you, I would have done so already," Raiga assured him.

He understood Koutarou's suspicions and did his best to dismiss them. There was now a gentle look in his eyes that hadn't been there before... This was the true Kasumi Raiga, not Maguz.

“So what do you need from us?” Kiriha asked.

Her reaction wasn’t as extreme as Koutarou’s, but she watched Raiga keenly. She was prepared to attack at a moment’s notice, depending on his next move. Nothing could have prepared her, however, for what he said next.

“I was thinking of cooperating with you, you see. More specifically, I shall provide you with information in exchange for a promise to defeat them.”

“What?!” Kiriha exclaimed, the shock obvious on her face. “So you say, but I’m sure you can understand why I can’t simply take you at your word.”

She quickly regained her cool and stared down Raiga with unwavering eyes. She still didn’t know what his angle was.

“I admit I haven’t given up on taking over the surface world, but that’s precisely why I cannot allow the Forthorthians to do it.”

Even defeated and captured, Kasumi Raiga hadn’t abandoned his ideals. He believed the People of the Earth were the rightful rulers of the world, and an alliance with Vandarion’s faction would fly in the face of that. He refused to yield the surface to anyone else, which was why he’d called on Kiriha and the others.

“I believe the Forthorthians are fine people, Raiga,” she said.

“They are strong in combat, yes,” Raiga conceded. “But I don’t believe they’re fit to rule.”

In essence, Raiga believed that the strong existed to rule the weak. His definition of strength, however, included wisdom and leadership—things he hadn’t sensed from Ralgwin. That was what had dissuaded him.

“What makes you think so?” Kiriha inquired, curious about Raiga’s thought process.

“Because our camp has largely been dismantled. Had they contacted us a year ago when we were at the height of our power, I could understand... But if they’re seeking us out now, they can’t be after more than havoc and slaughter.”

Raiga felt the remnants of Vandarion’s faction had no vision for the future. There was nothing inherently wrong with making an alliance, but Raiga believed

they had no plans beyond that. The radical faction wasn't as strong as it once was, after all. There was no suggestion of a long-term goal in their proposition.

"I'm afraid that much is true... They seek a bloody fight," Kiriha sighed.

She felt that Raiga was right on the money. Vandarion's faction had two objectives: to topple the royal families of Forthorthe, and to exact revenge on Koutarou and company. She couldn't imagine they'd given any thought to what would come afterward. They were the opposite of Elexis, who always considered the future.

"All the more reason for me to spurn them, then. Our goal is domination, not mere destruction."

Destruction was a means to an end in Raiga's eyes, not the end itself. As someone who sought to rule, his goal was to pull order from chaos and establish his dominion. He couldn't decimate the surface so badly that there was nothing left to rule over—that would defeat the point. With Forthorthe's technology, however, it was easily possible.

"Moreover, considering the People of the Earth's relatively small population... without something to keep the Forthorthians in check, we'd likely end up invaded ourselves."

"That's right. The Earth Dragon is no more..."

That was Raiga's second major concern. The People of the Earth were a minority. The surface dwellers, even though they were far weaker, had the sheer numbers to overwhelm the underground if they so chose. The People of the Earth had lost their greatest weapon—the Earth Dragon—which left them without a trump card to play in their own defense.

"Not even I would risk the People of the Earth's safety if there is nothing to be gained from it."

Raiga's desire to establish his people's dominance, in truth, was born out of love. Nothing would stop him from taking a calculated risk to seize glory, but if there was no glory to be had, he would never do anything to threaten the existence of the underground. He had no desire to ruin the home and the people that he so loved.

“Perhaps I was wrong... It seems you’ve changed some after all, Kasumi Raiga.”

Kiriha’s eyes softened just a little. Raiga was a dangerous opponent, but she could see he wasn’t armed for a fight.

“Witnessing Tayuma’s end gave me plenty to think about.”

Raiga still believed in rule by might, but seeing Tayuma so consumed by power that it transformed him into a monster... It was terrible. He’d trampled his own men. It had shown Raiga that even the superior couldn’t simply be allowed to do as they pleased without recourse.

“Moreover, I concede my defeat to you. You bested me, and I thereby would accept your rule.”



The radicals, in the end, had lost to the conservatives. That meant they were the stronger faction, and by his own ideals, Raiga had to acknowledge their right to rule. That was another reason he couldn't abide Ralgwin's offer... even if it might mean saving his own skin from the death penalty.

"Your views aside, Raiga, I respect your pride and love for the People of the Earth."

Raiga's views were dangerous. He was more prideful than ever now, which only added fuel to the fire. If left to his own devices, he would surely gather a new faction and make another play for the surface. But in spite of that, his love for his homeland was genuine. Kiriha had to acknowledge that.

"You are the victors. So do whatever it takes to protect our nation, Kurano Kiriha."

"I appreciate your cooperation, Raiga. Tell me everything you know."

This was Raiga's last resort. Victor or not, Kiriha was his nemesis. But without her strength, the People of the Earth would be caught up in a terrible fight they stood no chance of winning. In order to avoid that, to protect them, Raiga put his personal feelings aside and started talking.

Follow the Sparks

Monday, May 30th

Raiga was being detained until his trial, so he was no longer personally leading the radical faction. And for the same reason, he wasn't apprised of their latest actions. All the information he had came from visitors, so his grasp of the situation at large was rather vague.

"Well, I am under house arrest after all."

"But the radical faction still wants to keep you in the loop. You're a figurehead, and thus they feel compelled to report to you."

Raiga, as Maguz, had used his wits and willpower to lead the radical faction in their heyday. He'd shown them the way forward and given them purpose, and he was still considered an important member of the faction for the role he'd played. The radicals weren't just going to abandon their former leader, so they slipped him information via visitors whenever they could. It was a sign of respect for him, and a way to keep the now-fractured faction together.

"One of my visitors came to tell me that the faction has made contact with a surface company."

"We only know about Bell Tesla Electronics. We suspected something else was afoot but lacked any definitive evidence."

"Bell Tesla, you say? I wasn't given the name of the company, but from what I could piece together, it isn't a foreign company and they aren't new in town."

"Whoever it is has old spiritual energy technology, so the founding of the company may very well date back quite a bit. It sounds like the information you have is good."

Since Raiga was under house arrest, he couldn't meet with anyone from the radical faction directly. Instead, the radical faction sent him messengers, mostly sympathizers who were willing to deliver information for the cause. The risk of

leaks was high this way, however, so the messengers were only ever given bits and pieces of intel. That was how Raiga knew the faction was working with someone on surface but not who it was.

“I also know they’re working on a new base of operations with support from this surface company.”

“They’re that far along already? No wonder they managed to elude me.”

Kiriha knew that the remnants of Vandarion’s faction were looking to make contact with dissidents from both the underground and Folsaria. She’d cast a wide net in order to stay abreast of such communication, but she was one step behind them. That wasn’t so much a failure on her part, however, as it was a lucky break for Ralgwin. He’d found what he was looking for right away, so he’d already slipped through by the time Kiriha set up her net.

“I didn’t say much at the time because I lacked the perspective to make an informed decision. After doing some research on my own, however, I determined that the risks were too high.”

“My, my. So if you’d determined it was a low risk endeavor, we’d have another rebellion on our hands?”

“No. Either way, I wouldn’t have made a move. I’m here to take responsibility for what I’ve already done.”

“Then you’re saying that you simply would have kept your mouth shut if you didn’t perceive them as a threat.”

“That’s right. But they’re moving too swiftly for me to stay silent.”

Raiga had no intention of escaping from prison, regardless of Ralgwin’s intentions. But if Ralgwin had been after more than blood and destruction, Raiga would have considered helping him quietly behind the scenes. And if Ralgwin were a little slower or a little less competent, Raiga would have seen no need to intervene and alert Kiriha of his actions. But at the rate things were going, Raiga believed the People of the Earth would get caught in the crossfire of Ralgwin’s ambitions, and he wouldn’t stand for that.

“So you ultimately chose to sell out your former allies. That must have been a difficult decision.”

“Indeed... I would be lying if I said it wasn’t painful, but I cannot stake the People of the Earth on an unwinnable battle.”

There, a faint smile crossed Raiga’s lips. Betraying his own followers hurt, but there wasn’t much else he could do to help them from his cell. Contacting Kiriha was essentially his only lifeline. He couldn’t just sit idly by while they marched toward ruin if there was nothing to be gained from it.

“I see. Then I won’t say any more.”

“In that case... I’ve managed to track down the source of the information I received. It came from Uraga Tousei, who’s known for his ostensibly center-right views.”

“Uraga? That man...”

Uraga was an underground dweller who’d distanced himself from both the conservative and radical factions. He advocated not rushing to conclusions, but his patience and neutrality were facades. In truth, he was a dyed-in-the-wool radical. And now that Raiga was imprisoned, he’d stepped up to lead the faction in the shadows.

Koutarou and company’s main goal was to apprehend Ralgwin and disarm his forces, but preventing the leak of spiritual energy and magic was equally important. Whether it was on the surface or in Forthorthe, the premature acquisition of spiritual energy or magic could destabilize society. If any one person or organization had a monopoly on it, the economic fallout and underhanded terrorism to follow would be unprecedented. It would be a worldwide cataclysm.

That said, preventing a leak forever was impossible. The ideal would be gradually introducing the new technologies to society in order to keep any disruptions to a minimum. In short, Koutarou and company were trying to prevent a technological arms race. The same was true of trying to keep Forthorthian tech from reaching Earth too soon.

“So, for starters, we need to shadow this Uraga fellow and find the radical faction’s new base,” Harumi summarized.

After concluding their talk with Raiga, Koutarou and the others had moved to a guest room in the Kasumi estate. They were now holding a group meeting over how to proceed with the information they'd received.

"That would be for the best," Theia agreed. "As long as Kiriha's around, the radical faction won't be able to use any of their current resources or facilities to make weapons for Ralgwin. It would be too obvious. They'll need new production lines, which is likely the purpose of their new base."

There were multiple ways to get information from Uraga. They could capture and interrogate him, or investigate his computer and personal belongings. Harumi had suggested the lowest-risk option: tailing him from a safe distance and following up by investigating the people and places he visited.

Fortunately, with magic on their side, Koutarou and company would have an easy time eluding the spiritual energy technology Uraga had at his disposal. Since he was their only lead, they needed to play things as safely as possible for now. As Theia had said, the radical faction's new base likely doubled as a factory. And by following Uraga, he should eventually lead them to it. As such, they were simply watching him for the time being. Koutarou also thought this was the best plan under the circumstances.

"In order to make spiritual energy weapons, they'll need the right supplies to manufacture converters and condensers," he pointed out. "So we can probably assume this Uraga guy will make contact with the clans that have access to those."

Spiritual energy technology was made using proprietary materials from the underground. Not many families had control over their production, so Koutarou was certain Uraga would inevitably get in touch with one of them.

"I believe so too," Kiriha said with a nod. "As for who will take part in the shadowing mission..."

There, she scanned the group in front of her. She was racking her brain to figure out what team composition would be optimal for the task ahead of them.

"Ooh, ooh! Me, me, me! I'll do it! I wanna go! It'll be just like a spy movie!" Sanae immediately volunteered.

She sounded like she wasn't taking this seriously, but she was motivated if nothing else. Koutarou, on the other hand, shook his head.

"No way, Sanae," he said.

"What?! Why not?! I promise I'll be responsible and everything! Come on!"

Despite what she sounded like, Sanae understood the gravity of the situation. She knew trouble was at hand, and she eagerly wanted to use her powers to help out.

"Don't get me wrong, Sanae. I didn't say no because I think you're irresponsible."

"Then why can't I go?"

"You're a bad match for the job, plain and simple. If you use your powers, they'll detect you right away. Think of it this way. You're basically going up against a bunch of haniwas."

"Ho! Sanae-chan always stands out to us, ho!"

"You're too powerful, ho!"

To Koutarou, the problem was a practical matter and not a personal one. Sanae's powerful aura was all too easy to detect with spiritual energy technology. If she didn't actively hold it back, she could even emit enough spiritual energy to be visible to the naked eye.

"Your time to shine will come, so we need you to stick to a supporting role here," Koutarou explained.

"Boo... You promise, right?" Sanae pouted.

"Yeah, yeah. I promise."

"Good."

Once she understood the situation, Sanae reluctantly withdrew. Her exceptional power was an extreme case, but anyone with an excess of spiritual energy would be facing the same dilemma. Koutarou, for example, had a lot himself thanks to Sanae. Shizuka did too from Alunaya.

"In that case..." Kiriha mused. "I believe Harumi and Ruth would be the best

choices.”

Maki was normally a top candidate for stealth missions like this, but this time her exceptional talents worked against her. She also had a noteworthy spiritual capacity. That left the group’s other two spellcasters, and Kiriha ultimately decided that Harumi had the greater advantage.

Ruth, meanwhile, was selected as a machine expert who didn’t rely on spiritual energy. Spiritual energy technology was extraordinarily effective against living beings, but not so much against machines. So since this would be a covert operation, robots that could bypass spiritual energy surveillance were an especially valuable asset. Someone as powerful as Sanae could detect robots regardless, but military-grade equipment from the People of the Earth couldn’t. Clan would have been a possibility for the job too if her poor stamina didn’t disqualify her.

“Wait a minute. I’m going too,” Koutarou protested.

He understood Kiriha’s plan. A two-person team was ideal for the mission, but he believed Harumi and Ruth would be too defenseless on their own. Neither of them were frontline fighters, so they could find themselves in trouble against an aggressive enemy. Koutarou wanted to protect them, especially after the recent sniping attempt on Ruth. He was worried.

“I understand how you feel, but I’d rather send Maki than you. And even then, I’d prefer not to,” Kiriha said, shaking her head.

Thanks to Maki’s magic, Kiriha believed she would make a better guard on a covert mission. But there was still an irrefutable truth to be confronted: the more people on a stealth operation, the greater the risk of being noticed. It was true that Koutarou had superior combat abilities and could protect the girls in a fight, but if there was a fight... that would mean the mission had already failed. The ideal pair to avoid detection altogether was Harumi and Ruth.

“But...”

“Please believe in us, Master. We’ll return successfully.”

Koutarou was still prepared to insist, but Ruth’s smile cut him short. This was a situation he’d been in before, and he recognized an unwinnable battle when

he saw it.

“It seems you finally understand how we always feel about *you*, Satomi-kun,” Harumi giggled.

And that was the coup de grace. When Koutarou realized this anxious restlessness was what he put the girls through constantly, he couldn’t say a word in protest. He knew it would be hypocritical to raise a fuss over trouble he caused them on a regular basis.

“Sakuraba-senpai, Ruth-san... Just be careful, okay?”

“Don’t worry, Master. Your band of knights is the best in the universe.”

“If something actually happens, we’ll use the sword’s power to escape. It shouldn’t be a problem.”

The battle they were fighting had changed considerably. They were faced with all sorts of new challenges and dangers, but just like the girls had believed in Koutarou during the war... he now had to believe in them. That was what he told himself as he decided to send them off with his blessing.

Harumi was chosen for the mission for two reasons: her magic and her cautiousness. The latter was useful in any situation, and the former was particularly useful under the circumstances because it utilized the ancient language of magic.

“Appear from within me, spirits of the mind, spirits of life! Oh spinning wheel of the stars, use the loom of the moon to weave a mystic shroud! Conceal us, Star Veil!”

The modern magic Yurika and Maki used had spells that concealed spiritual energy, but they weren’t specifically meant to do so. It was just a fortunate side effect. Harumi’s ancient magic, however, could be used to improvise incantations. This allowed her to craft a spell explicitly for the job, making it subsequently several times more effective.

“How does it look, little haniwas?” she asked once she was done casting.

“It’s amazing, ho! Even a military-grade sensor would only pick up the

slightest reaction at close range, ho!”

“No one will find you with this as long as you keep your distance, ho! It’s incredible, ho!”

Harumi had incanted a spell meant to conceal their spiritual energy over an extended period of time, and her focus on duration had compromised the concealment slightly. The spiritual energy they still radiated, however, was so slight that it could only be detected at extremely short ranges. If they were ever in a situation where that was an issue, she could cast a second shorter spell for maximum concealment—another advantage of her flexible ancient magic. And once Harumi’s preparations were complete, Ruth began hers.

“Activating the thermal optic camouflage. Once the target’s locked on, begin automatic tracking using pattern 14-B.”

“As you wish, my lady.”

She started by launching an unmanned fighter. It was smaller than the ones she normally used in order to minimize its heat signature and make it harder to detect. Essentially, it sacrificed combat ability and maneuverability for increased stealth and reconnaissance performance. It was the ideal drone for the mission: observing Uraga and relaying information to Ruth and Harumi. The girls would then investigate accordingly.

“We’ll protect you guys, ho!”

“Defending ladies is the honor of any knight, ho!”

Korama and Karama were also tagging along as bodyguards and consultants. They had their own spiritual energy stealth devices, so they were a good addition to the team. They also had years of experience with the technology, so they could advise Ruth and Harumi who were relatively new to it. Both were important jobs, and the haniwas were all fired up for the mission. They’d even brought their spiritual energy katana and spiritual energy cannon along.

The People of the Earth’s cities were built underground, but the upper ceilings of their caverns were tremendously high. Thanks to that, Ruth had no problem sending her unmanned fighter up and out of sight at a high altitude. It was

already locked on to its target, and was currently trailing behind a lone man. Harumi and Ruth trailed even farther behind, led along at a safe distance by the drone. So far, the mission was going well.

Uraga Tousei was about the same age as Kasumi Kouma. He publicly took a center-right stance on politics and hadn't participated in Raiga's rebellion. He didn't stand out much because he always made sure to maintain the appearance of an ordinary citizen. In fact, he was known more for his work than his political views. He made a living as a fish farmer and was beloved by many people for making the practice viable underground.

He'd even gotten to be a trusted friend of Kouma's, so he was quite familiar with Raiga as well. He'd known him ever since he was a boy, and he sometimes visited the Kasumi estate even now to pay his respects to the imprisoned Raiga. By all appearances, he was just a mild-mannered old friend visiting a young man who'd gone astray. But behind the scenes, Uraga was a frontrunner of the radical faction. He used the trust people placed in him to further his political schemes, and that included his visits to Raiga. He was often the messenger who came to deliver information to the former leader of the faction.

"I'm sure this will come as quite a shock to Kouma-san," Harumi said with a sad expression.

Kouma had been through enough. Finding out his own son had started a rebellion and was inevitably facing the death penalty for his treason was bad enough as it was... But now it had come to light that an old friend had used and betrayed him too. Thinking about how the poor, kind Kouma must be suffering, Harumi was nearly driven to tears.

"Uncle Kouma is pretty sharp, ho! He's had Uraga on a watch list for a while now, ho!"

"He was just given special consideration because he was friends with Raiga, ho!"

"Really?"

Harumi was somewhat relieved to hear that Kouma had anticipated the situation, but she was sure it wouldn't erase the pain it caused. She still felt for him. As the inheritor of Alaia's memories, Harumi had been through an

extraordinary amount of suffering and betrayal herself. She was incredibly sympathetic. The heart she bore as an average girl, you could say, was just too big.

“Please don’t worry, Harumi-sama. Kouma-sama has overcome a great deal of hardship to make it to where he is. Above all else, he’s strong.”

Ruth, on the other hand, hailed from a martial family. She naturally had a much better understanding of what Kouma was going through. The struggle between the conservative and radical factions wasn’t new to the underground. It had been going on for decades, and Kouma had been involved in it all this time. This wasn’t the first setback he’d experienced, and it likely wouldn’t be the last. He was able to sustain himself through strength and experience.

“You’re right... I still have a long way to go, I suppose.”

Kouma was many years Harumi’s senior, and he had survived challenge after challenge. He wasn’t simply the kind old man he appeared to be. Harumi was actually a little embarrassed to admit she’d misjudged him.

“If you think that, Harumi-sama, then what about the rest of us?” Ruth asked with a wry smile.

Harumi’s wisdom and insight were far beyond her years as it was, and Alaia’s memories only made her more worldly and mature. If she still had a long way to go, then Ruth hated to think how long her own road must be. She didn’t have long to contemplate it, however...

“Harumi-chan, Ruth-chan! Uruga is going into a different building, ho!”

“This looks like the place where they make their deals, ho!”

“Oh dear. We’d better get back to work, Ruth-san.”

“Indeed. We can talk more later.”

For now, the girls were on the job. Their friendly smiles waned as they took on serious expressions. Depending on how this played out, they might need to infiltrate the building to go after Uruga. Things had gone well so far, but in truth, the mission was only just getting started.

Over the past week or so, Uraga had only been visiting places where he had professional connections. That seemed normal enough, especially for a work-focused man like him. But that was also part of his cover. If he openly frequented the radical faction's secret holdouts, he might as well be outing himself.

"That appears to be the warehouse of a historied sake brewery, ho!"

"They're working together on a restaurant, so he's probably here about that, ho!"

Whenever Uraga stopped by somewhere, the haniwas would introduce the girls to the location. As locals of the underground, they knew their way around town. They had general information on lots of businesses and residents, and their intel gave Ruth what she needed to make the next move.

"Harumi-sama, I'll start listening in on what's happening inside."

"That would be great."

Ruth opened up an audio channel from the unmanned fighter via her bracelet. Her go-to method was using a laser beam to detect vibrations from a windowpane and translate those into sound. It was her favorite technique because it could easily be done from a distance and had virtually no chance of being detected.

"This season's batch is doing well. Our customers are constantly praising it."

"This year marks our third century in the business, so we had to put all that love and experience into our product. Grand, isn't it? Hahaha!"

"You're quite confident, but you have every right to be."

"It is an honor to hear that from the savior of the food industry himself."

The incoming audio was even crisper than usual. Every word came in loud and clear. As the warehouse consisted of a single large room, the voices of Uraga and his business associate reached the window Ruth had tapped without any obstruction.

"It sounds like normal shop talk," Harumi observed as she listened in on the conversation with a serious expression.

By the sound of it, Uraga had truly only come here for business. They could hear talking, the sound of a barrel being opened, the sloshing of liquid, and the clinking of glasses. It all seemed to check out.

“It certainly does...”

Ruth heard everything Harumi did and agreed that it sounded normal, but a stern expression remained on her face. Seeing that, Harumi curiously cocked her head.

“Is something the matter, Ruth-san?”

“It’s just... something is bothering me...”

Ruth tapped on her bracelet to boot up an audio analysis program. She couldn’t shake a certain doubt she was feeling.

“What is it?”

“It’s the audio... It’s a little *too* clear.”

There was nothing unusual about the conversation or sounds they were hearing. The girls could agree on that much. But as for the audio itself, Ruth couldn’t help remarking its exceptional fidelity—something only a pro would notice.

“I knew it! What we’re hearing is being played from a speaker!”

When her AI finished its analysis, Ruth had her suspicions confirmed. With Earth’s current technology, there was an unavoidable loss of sound when it was recorded. High-quality equipment could play it back with exceptional fidelity—even though the difference would still be obvious when compared. Ruth’s keen ears had picked up on that, and the analysis confirmed it. Moreover, it seemed that the conversation they were hearing had been edited together; the cuts were apparent in the waveform data. All together, these results could only mean one thing.

“You mean their real conversation is being covered up by what’s playing on the speaker?”

“Most likely. I’ll try and see if I can decipher what they’re actually saying.”

Harumi and Ruth still looked serious, but the tone of their voices was a little

brighter. They'd hit dead ends for days now, but this might be a real lead. They were both hopeful at the prospect.

It wasn't long before Ruth uncovered the real conversation taking place in the warehouse. Listening in on it, she and Harumi were able to pin down Uraga's exact role in the radical faction. He was in charge of keeping their stronghold supplied with provisions.

Uraga made a living raising fish, but there were always ones too big or too small to be considered market-worthy. And rather than disposing of them, Uraga set his aside for the radical faction. He was also diverting about 10 percent of the wholesale purchases he made for his restaurants. It was apparently a small enough cut that no one had noticed. That wasn't the only trick he had up his sleeve, either. He used all kinds of practices to sneak the radical faction food resources, and that was precisely what he'd gone to the warehouse to discuss.

"There's a reaction on the spiritual energy radar, ho!"

"We need to be on high alert, ho!"

Once they'd uncovered Uraga's secret job, Harumi and Ruth tracked his schemes down to large private property outside of the city. Uraga himself was nowhere to be seen, however. They'd found this place by following a delivery truck.

"We don't know anything about this facility, ho!"

"And we know everything Ane-go knows, ho!"

The haniwas had access to Kiriha's information networks. And as the future chief of the People of the Earth and the commander of the surface invasion, she had one of the highest clearance levels in all the underground. If this facility was off her radar, chances were good that it was illegal.

"So this is the enemy's secret base... Ruth-san, I'm refreshing the spell."

"I'll check on the unmanned fighter too."

The property was heavily guarded compared to the warehouse. There was a

spiritual energy security system at the gate and armed guards at the facility several hundred yards behind it. It almost looked like a military compound. Based on what they could observe and the lack of available information about the place, the haniwas believed it was the radical faction's new base. As such, Harumi and Ruth were on guard.

"I just hope we can figure out who their connection on the surface is..."

"The faster we can figure it out, the faster we can get out of here."

"You can say that again."

While Harumi and Ruth were both ideal for this mission in terms of ability, neither one was a good fit in terms of personality. Both girls disliked suspecting people and sneaking around. They were willing to go as far as they needed to for the sake of their objective, but they'd both still prefer to be done with it sooner rather than later.

"We'll enter the active radar's range in thirty meters, ho!"

"Twenty... ten... We're in, ho! Everything's working just like we hoped, ho!"

Harumi, Ruth, and the haniwas all passed boldly through the front gate. They were of course using Harumi's concealment spell and Ruth's thermal optic camouflage. The excellent combination allowed them to waltz right into the base without notice.

"Phew, thank goodness..."

"You still get nervous even though you know it'll be all right, don't you, Harumi-sama?"

"I'm just not cut out for this."

"Heehee, I feel the same way."

"Not that we could tell Satomi-kun that..."

"That's true. If we did, Master would have insisted on coming along."

Harumi and Ruth shared a laugh together as they cautiously proceeded forward. Now that the enemy could beset them at any moment, they'd have to be especially careful.

“I knew it, ho! The patrolmen here are far more heavily armed than your standard security guards, ho!”

“It looks like they’re using military-grade weapons and armor, ho! Where’d they get all that?”

“We’ll need to investigate that too...”

“Let’s stay on our toes as we get closer, Ruth-san.”

“Yes, let’s. I’d like to stop behind that shrubbery over there to gather some more information.”

“That sounds like a good idea.”

As the group approached the building, they were able to get a better grasp of its security. Ruth, however, was ever cautious and wanted as much intel as possible before going in. On her lead, they took up cover behind some bushes while she ran a few scans.

“The site’s surveillance is focused on its outermost perimeter.”

“I can’t sense any mana. It doesn’t seem like there’s anything magical here.”

“There are spiritual energy reactions here and there, ho!”

“There also seems to be a space distortion inside the building, ho! Ruth-chan, can you please confirm?”

“Let me see... Yes, it is indeed a space distortion, but it’s small. It might be personal equipment, or maybe even some advanced spiritual energy technology. Either way, we’ll have to investigate it.”

This—a space distortion reaction—was their biggest lead yet. It was a hallmark of Forthorthian technology, although they couldn’t be certain that was the cause. The reaction was small enough that there were other possibilities. Yurika created space distortions when she used teleportation magic, for example, and Sanae did too when she used her powers at full blast. Really, the reaction could be anything that bent space by some means. They’d need more information before they could determine what was causing it.

“It seems, then, that we now have two tasks,” Harumi declared, holding up two fingers. “The first is to locate the source of the space distortion. The second is to get into their computer system and identify the surface company who’s working with them.”

Infiltrating the building to discover the source of the space distortion would be dangerous, but it should be a quick job since they knew its exact location. They needed to get inside anyway to figure out who their partner surface company was, but they didn’t have the manpower or time to cover the entire base. Instead, they’d be doing their sleuthing through the computer network. Harumi’s idea was to accomplish those two tasks and then decide how to proceed from there.

“I think that’s a sound plan, Harumi-sama, but it would be safer to take over their security network first.”

“Oh, heehee... Of course. Once security is taken care of, we can get to work.”

Hacking into the base’s security network would make getting inside easier, safer, and faster—both physically and digitally. The same would also be true of their escape. Functionally, Ruth was suggesting a little extra work before the mission that would pay off tenfold down the line.

“I also believe this approach would make Master worry the least.”

“You’re right... I’m sure Satomi-kun is worried sick about now.”

“Harumi-sama, we’ve done our fair share of waiting and worrying, but it seems it isn’t much easier being on this side of things.”

“It is difficult. When you’re out in the field, you want to push yourself for everyone’s sake... but for everyone’s sake, you also know you shouldn’t. I had no idea this would be so hard.”

For the first time, the two girls realized what it felt like to head into battle and leave their loved ones behind. They normally only played supporting roles in combat, so this was a new sensation for them. They’d remember it well the next time they had to see Koutarou or Theia off.

The facility had its own network, which couldn’t be infiltrated from the

outside. The girls would need to find a point of entry to tap into it.

“That said, to get inside and plug in means getting past security first... We have ourselves quite a dilemma, don’t we?” Harumi mused with a furrowed brow.

The plan was to take over the security network before getting inside, but as it turned out, they needed to get inside before they could take over the security network. It was a rather sticky situation. They could try infiltrating the building anyway, but that was a high-risk endeavor that could easily get them caught. They could also try slipping in the main entrance, but it was so heavily guarded that it would be a dangerous operation even with magic and technology on their side.

“I think it’s time for my specialty,” proclaimed Ruth.

“Your specialty?” Harumi asked curiously.

“This.”

There, Ruth reached into her backpack and pulled out something about the size of a plastic bottle. As Harumi stared at it, it began moving in Ruth’s hands.

“Goodness, is that a robot?”

“Yes. It’s a semi-automatic reconnaissance bot. And thanks to Clan-sama, it should be able to access the network.”

When the reconnaissance bot stopped moving, it now looked like a rabbit rather than a plastic bottle. It was made to move terrestrially, going from cover to cover to secretly gather information. Clan had given it a new function as well—a wireless transmitter that could port with any computer in range. With that, Ruth and Harumi should be able to breach the facility network even from the outside.

“We’ll sneak in instead of this rabbit, ho!”

“Yeah, ho! This is our big chance to shine, ho!”

“But Harumi-sama and I are counting on you two to protect us.”

“We can’t argue when you say it like that, ho!”

“It’s a knight’s honor and duty to defend gentleladies, ho!”

Ruth was able to convince the haniwas she needed them as bodyguards, but there was actually another reason she didn’t want to send them in. If it came down to that, they couldn’t self-destruct like the rabbit could. Ruth knew she needed to plan for the worst case scenario. The reconnaissance bot was fashioned with an explosive charge that wouldn’t leave any evidence behind... and, even though they were just machines too, Ruth could never ask the haniwas to make that kind of sacrifice.

“Now, I would like everyone to focus their defensive and stealth measures on the reconnaissance bot.”

“Of course. They should be more effective that way, but... Heehee...”

“Harumi-sama?”

“Did you choose this design, Ruth-san?” Harumi asked with a smile.

She wasn’t very well versed with Forthorthian technology, but she knew robots came in all manner of shapes. There were likely more barebone and practical models available for the mission, but Ruth had chosen this design in particular. Harumi couldn’t help finding it amusing.

“Y-Yes, actually...” Ruth admitted with a bashful smile.

She was the dignified daughter of a longstanding family of knights—a reputation with a certain gravitas. As such, it was a little embarrassing to be called out for her girly tastes. But Harumi meant nothing by it.

“There’s no need to be embarrassed,” she assured Ruth. “I would have chosen it myself.”

“Really?”

“Yes. I quite enjoy cute things like this.”

“I-I see...”

Seeing Harumi smile, Ruth smiled too. Her reassurance meant a lot to her, and she found herself quite grateful Harumi was her partner on this mission.

“I have to admit, though... If I knew Satomi-kun were coming, I might have

picked something that looked a little stronger,” Harumi confessed.

“I think I would have too,” Ruth said with a nod.

“It would have to be something worthy and befitting His Excellency the Blue Knight, after all.”

“Publicly, at least... Heehee.”

As Ruth laughed, the robotic rabbit in her hands began moving again. It jumped away just like a real rabbit would, then hopped over to Harumi. She would be casting a few spells on it before it set out on its mission.

“This is fun. Casting spells on a mechanical rabbit sounds like something out of a fairy tale,” she giggled as she held her palms up toward the rabbit and began her incantation.

Since the reconnaissance robot was smaller than the haniwas, it required even less mana to conceal it. And with the mana she saved that way, Harumi was able to cast several extra protective spells on it—invisibility, electromagnetic absorption, and the like. Once she was done, the rabbit glowed with all the colors of the rainbow to Harumi’s eyes. Ruth could actually see the light too, thanks to the crest on her forehead.

“Now it really looks like something straight out of a fairy tale, Ruth-san.”

“The robotic rabbit and the rainbow light are a surprisingly enchanting combination.”

“I bet we could do that too, ho...”

“Ho! Give it up, Brother! There’s just no competing with cuteness, ho!”

The two girls and the two haniwas saw the rabbit off. It bounded from cover to cover just like a real rabbit, leaving a faint streak of rainbow-colored light behind it. With its magical enhancements, it artfully kept out of sight as it closed in on the building. It was so stealthy and quiet that it might not have even needed Harumi’s magic.

“Harumi-sama, our little bunny—erm, the reconnaissance bot has discovered a computer terminal.”

“Wow, it’s only been a few minutes.”

“It’s porting with the terminal as it sets up mirrors.”

“Mirrors?”

“I’m trying to stick to using lasers. I’d rather not send signals while we’re in the enemy stronghold.”

The reconnaissance bot had chosen a computer close to a window that wasn’t visible from the door to the room—the ideal setup. There were multiple ways of communicating with a terminal once the rabbit ported with it, but lasers were the safest. They were direct light and, as long as they used a frequency that couldn’t be seen by the naked eye, they were virtually impossible to detect. The rabbit was setting up mirrors as it completed the porting process so it could send laser communications outside as well. Once they were connected, Ruth would have access to the terminal from the safety of the shrubbery outside.

“Okay, the connection is stable now. Looks like we’re in.”

Once their link to the network was established, it was time to begin the next phase of the plan: contacting Clan.

Clan wasn’t on location with the girls. She was stationed back at Kouma’s house with Koutarou and the others and would be assisting over comms.

“Come in, Clan-san. We’re connected to a computer inside the base now,” Harumi called through her bracelet.

“So it’s finally my turn, is it? Just wait while I hack in,” she responded.

Functionally, Clan had two jobs on this mission. The first was infiltrating the enemy base’s network, and the laser Ruth had set up was meant to facilitate just that. Once Clan was in, they would have control of the entire base—security included.

“Strange... Their network is better defended than I thought it’d be,” Clan mused as she worked.

“Let me help you, Clan-sama,” Ruth offered.

“By all means, Pardomshiha.”

Clan was encountering network security that exceeded what was considered standard for the People of the Earth. That meant it would take longer to crack,

but with Ruth's help, they would have it done in no time.

"The basic software is definitely the People of the Earth's, but this computer performance is abnormal," Clan observed as she worked.

"Does that mean that they're receiving technical support by way of new parts?" Ruth asked.

"I suspect so. It would be easier to beef up computers they already have rather than replace them altogether and risk compatibility issues."

Clan had a feeling Forthorthian technology was involved here. She was skeptical that the People of the Earth's security programs would run properly on Forthorthian hardware, so she believed it was more likely that the remnants of the radical faction had retrofitted their existing computers with superior components. Dramatically enhanced processing power, RAM, *et cetera* would allow their units to outperform even the supercomputers of the surface... But the only way the radical faction could have gotten their hands on such cutting-edge technology was through Vandarion's faction.

"Speculating here won't do us any good, however. Let's save that for later and focus on silencing this security for now," Clan suggested.

"Yes, let's hurry," Ruth agreed.

Once Clan was in the system, her second job was to disable the base's security measures. This would allow Harumi and Ruth to infiltrate the building and investigate the source of the space distortion. Clan's task, then, was really to keep them out of danger. That was easy enough for her, however. She could tamper with the security system and make it look like cameras, patrol bots, and the like were still working.

Dealing with the guards was a little trickier, but Clan had discovered a security manual on the terminal she was accessing. With the information contained therein, she could easily identify patrol routes and areas that were short-staffed. She used that to remotely guide Harumi and Ruth down the safest paths possible. And at this rate, it seemed like they would reach their destination without having to neutralize any guards along the way.

“Judging by the look of things, it seems like Raiga was right. This place is brand new. There are still lapses in their security that we can take advantage of,” Clan reported to the girls as they moved.

She’d been scrutinizing the base this entire time. It turned out that its security records only went back half a month—most likely when the base was first built. Very little had been updated since then either, giving the impression that the enemy was in quite a hurry. The same was probably true for more than just security, too. The entire base seemed to be a rush job.

“That’s probably why Raiga was so worried,” remarked Harumi. “It’s like Vandarion’s faction really doesn’t care about the People of the Earth.”

“Indeed,” Ruth agreed. “The radical faction has been decimated, but Vandarion’s men are rushing them to make a move. The risks are extremely high. And for Raiga to have realized all that from prison... He’s a truly dangerous opponent.”

If the remnants of Vandarion’s faction had been willing to dig in and give the radical faction the support they really needed, that would have been one thing. But they were moving on a swift charge and wouldn’t slow down for anyone. In truth, it was only a matter of time before something went wrong... And Raiga had no interest in being trampled underfoot by the Forthorthians. They could achieve bloodshed and widespread panic together, certainly, but Raiga was after more than that. The true scope of the situation was only just now sinking in for Harumi and Ruth.

“Ruth-san, Raiga said that the remnants of Vandarion’s faction had no vision for the future... but don’t you think it’s possible they’re hoping the radical faction will destroy itself?” Harumi asked hesitantly.

“I’m afraid that is indeed a possibility,” Ruth conceded reluctantly. “Taking all the technology they can get from the People of the Earth and then casting them aside once they’re done with them... sounds like something Vandarion’s faction would do.”

Both girls proceeded down the hallway under Clan’s guidance with stern expressions on their faces. They now realized the fate of the underground—the fate of the People of the Earth—depended on the success of this mission. It was

a serious job, and thus they took every step carefully. Suddenly, however...

“Stop here, ho!”

“There’s someone around the corner, ho!”

“It appears to be standard security personnel,” Clan chimed in to confirm. “It’s nearly time for the changing of the guard, so I doubt they’ll head your way. Just hold your position for now.”

“Understood, Clan-san. We’ll wait here.”

The girls were being extraordinarily cautious, so it was unlikely the enemy would find them. They weren’t going to take any risks, however. Even while on standby, they were discreetly hiding in the shadows with thermal optic camouflage.

“As predicted, it’s a shift change. They’re headed for the guard station now.”

“The coast is clear, ho!”

“Time to go, ho!”

Harumi and Ruth stepped out of the shadows and resumed their course, just as carefully as before. And within a few minutes, they arrived at their objective—the source of the space distortion.

“This is the place.”

Harumi stepped inside and looked around, but not for the distortion. She was trying to identify an escape route. There were no windows in the room, however, and it seemed the only way in or out was the door where they’d entered. In such a precarious place, they wouldn’t be able to stay for long.

“It appears to be a warehouse...”

The space was vast but mostly empty. The lined-up boxes and stacked containers scattered about suggested it was a storage facility, meaning the real question now was why they’d detected a space distortion here.

“Little haniwas, are you sure that the reaction is coming from here?” Harumi couldn’t help asking.

“There’s no doubt about it, ho! We’re picking it up even now, ho!”

“It looks like it’s by the wall in the back, ho!”

“Is something the matter, Harumi-sama?”

“Well... I figured if they were sharing technology with the Forthorthians, this would be a laboratory or something...”

“That’s true. Why *is* there a space distortion here in a storage facility?”

If the radical faction had received powerful technology from Vandarion’s faction, it should be under study... not abandoned in a storeroom. It struck both girls as odd.

“What do you think is the meaning of this, Harumi-sama?”

“If it’s something too advanced for them to handle, maybe they gave up on studying it for the time being. Or maybe the base’s lab isn’t complete yet. Either way... something strange seems to be going on here. We should exercise utmost caution.”

On their way to the warehouse, Harumi and Ruth had seen evidence that the enemy was preparing for an attack. They spotted soldiers training, trucks loaded with military equipment, weapons, and more. It looked like the radical faction was ready for war. It was clear they were actively receiving aid from Vandarion’s faction, so it seemed unlikely they’d turned over technology the radicals weren’t capable of handling.

That being the case, the space distortion in the warehouse likely meant one of two things: it was simply in storage until a laboratory could be built, or it was actually just an unknown, exceptionally strong piece of spiritual energy technology. There was no telling which, however, so as Harumi had said, they would need to proceed with great care.

“Understood. I’ll bring out everything I can use. Then, Harumi-sama, please use your magic to—”

“I think this will work better.”

Smiling softly, Harumi extended her right palm facing outward. It was different from the gesture she used to cast magic, which required both hands. And just as Ruth wondered what she was doing...

“Come, Signaltin!”

With those words, the crest on Harumi’s forehead began glowing as a brilliant, shining sword appeared in her hand. Pure white mana flowed from her body, giving her hair an unmistakable silver color. Signaltin was bound by contract to all nine girls now, but Harumi still shared the most profound connection with it.

“Seeing you like this with that sword, Harumi-sama... It’s an incredible sight to behold for a Forthorthian like me.”

“Then I’m sorry to say it’s just little old me... Heehee.”

With a smile, Harumi brandished the brilliant blade in the same traditional style that Koutarou used. It was quite striking, and it was clear she’d put a lot of effort into practicing it. Alaia had left Harumi, but blessed her with her knack for swordsmanship. Their souls, on a very deep level, were still one and the same.

“Don’t say that! You’re—”

“Voiceprint for Ruthkania Nye Pardomshiha confirmed. Changing from standby mode to combat mode.”

Whirrr...

Having gotten a little emotional, Ruth unwittingly raised her voice. And something responded to it—the source of the space distortion at the back of the room.

“Is that what I think it is?!”

“Yes! It’s a mobile weapon!”

At first glance, it appeared to be a box about two meters tall. But when Ruth’s voice activated it, it began moving and pushed away the objects around it. When its transformation was complete, it looked like a giant metallic spider armed with all kinds of weapons.

“This was a trap!”

The terrible truth set in on Ruth the moment she saw the mobile weapon. Its armaments were what was triggering the reaction on the haniwas’ equipment. And it had been left here to exterminate anyone who came to investigate. It

was a trap set under the assumption that the base would be discovered.

“But this proves it beyond a shadow of a doubt! This base has a Forthorthian connection!”

Harumi glared at the mobile weapon as she took one, then two steps forward with both her hands on Signaltin. They’d fallen into a trap, but the presence of a mobile weapon here was concrete proof that Raiga’s information was good—the radical faction was in contact with Vandarion’s faction. This meant they now had the enemy’s number as long as Harumi and Ruth could escape this trap and get their intel back to Koutarou and the others.

“I’m reading a high energy reaction! It’s getting ready to fire!” Ruth called.

“Ruth-san, I’m leaving our defenses to you!” Harumi called back.

“Harumi-sama... U-Understood!”

Ruth hesitated for a moment when she saw Harumi approach the enemy, but she acquiesced when she remembered what Harumi was holding in her hands. Harumi had no psychic powers, but her ancient magic gave her a great advantage with Signaltin. With that, she might even be just as strong as Koutarou.

“Come, spirits of the wind! Gather in my sword and show me the power of the Thunder Emperor!”

Harumi continued to stride forward as she chanted. No longer held back by the constraints of her weak constitution, she moved with grace and power. But her enemy was making its move too. The mobile weapon crawled dexterously across the room with its long legs like there was nothing at all in its way. As it approached the girls, it took aim with the beam cannon atop its upper body, which was an extraordinarily stable firing platform as it was supported by eight legs. It locked on to Harumi and fired.

“Harumi-sama, please continue straight ahead!”

Between Harumi and the incoming beam were six small fighters. Following Ruth’s orders, they broke into two teams of three in delta formations. Each team then generated a distortion field, effectively protecting Harumi and Ruth with a two-layer barrier.

Vrrrsh... Crack!

But not even that was enough to stop the beam, although it did dramatically reduce its power.

“Ho! Don’t forget about us!”

“This’ll be easy, ho!”

When the fighters’ barriers failed, Karama and Korama were ready to put up a fight. The two haniwas summoned a spiritual energy field to defend the girls. Stopping such a powerful beam wasn’t something they could ordinarily do, but this weakened one was no match for them.

“That’s as far as you go!” Ruth shouted at the approaching mobile weapon.

She then ordered the fighters to abandon their delta formations and come together in a single circle. All six of them then fired in unison, their lasers striking the mechanical spider at the exact same time.

Zing!

The mobile weapon was still targeting Harumi, but when it sensed the incoming attack, it shifted its focus to defending itself with a distortion field. The fighters weren’t able to do any damage because of it, but their diversion bought Harumi enough time to safely close in on the mobile weapon.

“Like a dragon swooping from a storm cloud, lay low my foe! Thundering Dragon Claw!”

Once Harumi was in range, she finished incanting her spell. Signaltin flashed white as she brought it down on the mechanical monster as hard as she could. She lacked Koutarou’s raw strength, but she made up for it with her magic, her elegance, and her accuracy. Her strike cut through the front leg the mobile weapon had raised to defend itself, and continued into its head which was full of sensors and other critical parts. Harumi then released all the mana she’d gathered in her sword.

Boom!



A moment later, a bright light filled the room. She could use ranged magic as well, but she'd chosen to seal the deal with a single close-range spell. Channeling her mana directly into an opponent made for a far more powerful attack. It was riskier, of course, but Harumi had faith in Ruth and the haniwas. And that trust had paid off. The lightning Harumi unleashed into the mechanical spider's head shocked the whole unit with a powerful electric current that fried it for good. There was a small series of explosions, and the mobile weapon collapsed on the spot.

"Phew..."

When she saw that her foe would never move again, Harumi let out a sigh of relief and returned the silver sword to its sheath. Even though she had faith in herself and her friends, fighting still made her nervous. There were too many uncertainties.

"Well done, Harumi-sama!" Ruth called out to her as she ran over with a big smile.

Unlike Harumi, she seemed ecstatic over the fight that had just taken place. She thought Harumi's victory was splendid and the attack she'd used incredible. It was impressive to take a mobile weapon out with one hit.

"It was my first time trying that, so I'm glad it worked."

"Heehee, there's no need to be so modest. This was how the sword was meant to be used, and seeing you in action with it is exquisite."

That was the other reason Ruth was so excited. She'd finally gotten to see what Signaltin would have looked like in Alaia's hands, as Forthorthe's sword of kingship was normally only wielded by the ruler who made a contract with it. Ruth's praise, however, put a sour look on Harumi's face.

"This sword rightfully belongs to Satomi-kun. It was meant to be used with both of us fighting," she said rather sulkily.

Both Harumi and Alaia had turned Signaltin over to Koutarou, and they'd each made a pact to protect him. Koutarou, in turn, would then protect everyone else. That arrangement was absolute.

“I know, Harumi-sama. I really do, but... it still thrills me to see how strong Empress Alaia would have been at full power.”

Ruth understood where Harumi was coming from. She bore a sword-shaped crest of her own, after all. But as a citizen of Forthorthe, she couldn't help her elation at witnessing Empress Alaia's power incarnate.

“Both Alaia-san and I prefer seeing Satomi-kun strong.”

Harumi, as well as Alaia, had entrusted Koutarou with the sword of kingship out of love. That was why she felt a strong resistance to the idea that the sword belonged in her hands. It wasn't a point she could concede.

“Harumi-sama, please don't pout. I too prefer seeing Master as the strongest!”

Ruth couldn't help smiling wryly at Harumi's unusual stubbornness, but she was also sympathetic. It was this purity of heart that had sustained her over two thousand years.

“Really?”

“I wouldn't support his band of knights with all my heart otherwise.”

“Yes, of course... I'm sorry, Ruth-san. Next time—”

Harumi knew Ruth meant no harm and that, in truth, their hearts were connected. But just as her spirits started to lift...

Whoosh!

Signalin suddenly disappeared from her hands. With the crest on her forehead activated, she immediately knew what was happening.

“Satomi-kun is fighting somewhere!”

The sword vanished because Koutarou had called for it. Harumi could feel its power swelling, too. That could only mean Koutarou was wielding it in combat.

“Harumi-sama, Clan-sama just sent a message! It appears the Kasumi estate is under attack!”

“It is?! I see... This was a trap to separate our forces!”

The truth finally set upon Harumi. This was what Vandarion's faction had

intended all along. The decimated radical faction hardly made a worthy ally... No, instead, they were *using* the radicals. Ralgwin had accurately guessed that all it would take to make them squeal was dangling a little Forthorthian technology in front of them. He'd essentially forced the radical faction's hand, knowing it would draw Koutarou and company to the underground.

And so far, the plan had been a success. All that was left now was the simple matter of launching their real offensive. The ideal would be to attack while Koutarou and company were split up, which was the true purpose of the space distortion diversion. It was mere bait, and Harumi and Ruth had fallen for it hook, line, and sinker.

"Ruth-san, let's hurry back to Satomi-kun and the others! I'm sure the enemy will be swarming this place soon too!"

It wasn't impossible that the mobile weapon had sent an alert message before it was destroyed. Its mere activation may have triggered something. It was a foregone conclusion that the enemy knew someone was in the warehouse now.

"Harumi-sama, please cast an illusion of us on my fighters! I'll use them to buy time!"

"Understood! I'm on it!"

The warehouse had only one exit, which was invariably where the enemy would attack. It was a deviously designed trap indeed, but the girls were one step ahead of the enemy. They'd taken the mobile weapon out in one hit, effectively buying them the time. Whether or not it was enough to escape, however, would ultimately determine the success or failure of their mission.

The Offensive at the Kasumi Estate

Wednesday, June 8th

The remnants of Vandarion's faction were stymied by room 106's stalwart defenses. Corona House was once a humble apartment building, but now it was an extension of a galactic embassy. It had been fortified in subtle ways in addition to the guards and stealth fighters that now patrolled it around the clock. It was as protected as a military base, meaning that a direct assault on it would be pointless. The most tactical plan, in that case, would be to get Koutarou and his allies away from it.

That was where the People of the Earth came in. If Vandarion's men could use the radical faction to their advantage, it would be an easy way to draw Koutarou out. That was what Ralgwin had in mind when he first approached them.

The radicals' aim was to overthrow the current establishment, which would have made them ideal allies under different circumstances, but they'd recently staged a failed coup and their leader was detained. Their organization was destabilized and the risk of forming a serious alliance with them was thus too high. And sure enough, Raiga had taken the first opportunity to sell Vandarion's faction out...

But that was essentially what Ralgwin wanted. Once rumor reached Koutarou and company that trouble was brewing underground, he was certain they'd make a move. They'd be forced to leave Corona House, meaning all that was left for Ralgwin to do was wait. He discreetly took his troops underground and camped out until the time was right.

"So this is what you were planning..." Fasta remarked.

"To be honest," Ralgwin replied, "I would have liked it if another couple of them had headed for the secret base, but I suppose I can't be too greedy."

Beyond the Kasumi estate was a forested hill where Ralgwin had taken up

with his men. They calmly observed the situation as they waited for their chance to attack.

“How’s it looking, Fasta?” he asked.

“They’ve been cooped up in one of the rooms in the back for a while now. It seems they’re up to something.”

“Well, their friends are sneaking into an enemy base, so they’re probably providing support. Perhaps even making plans for what’s to come.”

Ralgwin’s best sniper, Fasta, was a skilled reconnaissance agent. That was part of what made her such a deadly assassin, and she was now putting her talents to use tracking the inner goings-on of the Kasumi estate. The assault had not yet begun, however, so she was still keeping her methods discreet—small measuring devices, surveillance crafts, and the like that wouldn’t be noticed from a distance. Fortunately for her, the Kasumi mansion was a primarily wooden structure, so there was a lot of intel she could gather even at this range.

“Everyone aside from the infiltration team is gathered in that room,” she informed Ralgwin.

“That means this is a decisive moment for them... Everyone, prepare for battle and await my order!” he called out.

While Harumi and Ruth were shadowing Uruga, Koutarou and the others went about their own business as they waited for results. They took turns eating, napping, training, and such as they waited to hear back, so there were rarely more than two or three people in the makeshift conference room at any given time. Everyone was gathered there now, however, which suggested something was happening—likely the invasion of the radical faction’s secret base. If worse came to worst, they might even flee the Kasumi estate to go to their friends’ aid. That meant Ralgwin had to make his move, and while Koutarou and the others were focused on Ruth and Harumi was the perfect chance.

“Ralgwin-sama, the mobile weapon we set up in the storehouse is sending a signal! It’s engaged in combat!”

“Then we move in ten seconds! Start the countdown!”

There was a several second delay between a mobile weapon identifying a target and attacking, and it would be even longer before Koutarou and company could process what was happening and respond. They were all undoubtedly concentrated on the news that there was a Forthorthian weapon in the radical faction’s base right now... making it the perfect time to spring an attack. Ralgwin didn’t hesitate to act.

“Five... Four... Three... Two... Move out!”

“All units, permission to fire! We don’t want them to know what hit them!”

The troop rolled out on Ralgwin’s command. They were stationed on the hill behind the Kasumi estate, which was a good distance away. They were all mounted in vehicles and ready to go, so the plan was to begin the assault that way. The vehicles made it difficult to approach stealthily, so an ambush was immediately out of the question. Instead, they’d open fire as soon as they could with the heavy-duty turrets and such that wouldn’t be an option in a quieter strike on foot.

“Begin your assault as soon as you’re in range!”

Their first move was a beam cannon bombardment, which was fairly common practice in Forthorthian ground battles. With the widespread availability of other technology, missiles had largely fallen out of favor with infantry, and lasers simply weren’t as effective inside the atmosphere. Because of that, a fully-charged beam cannon was always the opening weapon of choice.

“Enemy has activated defenses and is returning fire!”

Both sides were now exchanging beam volleys, but there was a fundamental difference between them. Ralgwin and his men used superheated heavy metal particle beams, and all of the shots coming from the Kasumi estate were made of spiritual energy. Due to their very nature, each side was having a great deal of trouble defending against their opponents’ weapons.

“It’s too late for you! We’re already closing in on you!”

But even in the face of a hefty counterattack, Ralgwin was confident and unshaken. Losses in the initial onslaught at this range were well within his

expectations. As far as he was concerned, everything was going according to plan.

Koutarou and company detected Ralgwin the moment he opened fire. In truth, he was in an advantageous position since he already had his troops underground; there was no space distortion when they warped in, for example. Koutarou and the girls could have been in serious trouble if Kiriha hadn't anticipated an attack. She'd considered the possibility that the remaining radicals might come to try to liberate Raiga, and the extra precautions she'd taken because of that were paying dividends now.

"High energy reaction detected! It's coming from the hill like you predicted, Kii!"

In terms of raiding the Kasumi estate, there were several potential attack routes. Kiriha had foreseen that a threat from the hill behind the mansion would be the most likely, and thanks to her keen insight, everyone was primed to respond.

"Deploy the spiritual energy field! Open the cannon ports and return fire!" Kiriha ordered immediately after hearing Clan's report.

Doing nothing in the face of an attack would only land them in deeper trouble. And since Kiriha was already prepared for an attack, she decided to put her resources to use. She'd brought a mobile spiritual energy field and beam cannon to the Kasumi estate, and she was relying on those to buy some time while Koutarou and everyone else got in position.

"Bwahaha! Your starboard fire is weaksauce! What are you doing?!" Sanae cackled.

She was in charge of the initial bombardment. Spiritual energy weaponry was heavily influenced by its user, which gave her an incredible advantage with it. She could launch an attack in any direction she wanted and still psychically guide her fire to her target. Moreover, she also had the energy to supercharge spiritual weapons and change their attack properties, including making them nonlethal if she so chose. Vandarion's faction had already had to carry away several unconscious men thanks to her.

“Bad news, Kiriha-san! This wall’s taking heavy fire! They’re going to blow it wide open!” Shizuka radioed in a shrill tone from behind the mansion.

The Kasumis hailed from a line of proud warriors, but their family estate hadn’t been used as a stronghold for hundreds of years. The centuries-old stone walls no longer had the defensive power they once used to, and unfortunately, the spiritual energy field did little to protect against physical impact. It only weakened the enemy’s beams, which were still hammering the rear wall. Like Shizuka warned, it was only a matter of time before it gave way.

“Yurika, when you get to the backyard, reinforce the stone wall!” Kiriha called.

“O-Okay! But I don’t think it’ll last long!” Yurika called back.

“That’s fine! Whatever you can do to hold them off!”

Ralgwin’s forces would aim to breach the mansion somewhere out of the way of Sanae’s bombardment. Their goal was also presumably to assassinate Koutarou and the girls, so they would move in swiftly to go for the kill.

Koutarou, Theia, and Shizuka were already out behind the mansion. As the group’s main fighters, they’d moved immediately when the assault began. Yurika, a versatile magic user, had stayed inside the mansion in order to respond wherever was needed—and by Kiriha’s estimation, that was now the backyard. They had precious little time, and every second counted.

“Heh, it’s finally my turn,” Theia pronounced with a fearless grin.

She stood nearly five meters tall right now thanks to Melee Black, an accessory for her combat dress. As its name suggested, it was an equipment setup that focused on hand-to-hand combat. Its arms and legs were designed like weapons for close-quarters combat. Strictly speaking, it was something of a cross between a combat suit and a mobile weapon.

Wham!

When Theia confidently palmed her fist, the robotic arms of Melee Black imitated the gesture. It was fashioned with several attack options, but its greatest weapon was its incredible mass. There was a weighty impact when it

simply planted its fist into its own hand.

“Theia, you’ll be hard to get around... but you can leave your blind spots to me.”

“Letting me steal the show, are you? That’s surprisingly deferential of you, Koutarou.”

“Sakuraba-senpai’s not around right now, so I can’t fight at full strength. Besides...”

“Besides what?”

“Besides... I decided that I’m going to trust you guys more. Like how I let Sakuraba-senpai and Ruth-san go on that mission alone.”

“Heh, it seems you finally understand! Just sit back and watch me go! I’ll show you how great your lord is!”

Koutarou’s words were an instant boost to Theia’s morale. Adrenaline pumped through her veins, filling her with even more confidence. And as if responding to that, a red sword began glowing on her forehead. Its power spread throughout her body, the excess of which was channeled directly into Melee Black.

“Satomi-kun, don’t you have anything like that to say to me too?” Shizuka asked with a teasing smile as she did some light stretches.

“Don’t kid yourself, Landlord-san. You know you’re stronger than me.”

“Come on! I’m scared of getting shot too, you know?”

“Fine... How about some anmitsu later?”

“It’s a date! You can’t go back on your word later, okay?”

“Yes, yes, I know.”

“Good!”

Shizuka took one last stretch and glanced back at the wall being bombarded. She now looked like she was raring to go. And just like Theia, the sword-shaped crest on her forehead was glowing bright. She was a deadly force to be reckoned with right now, and likely wouldn’t be her usual smiling self again

until this fight was over.

“S-Sorry! I-I’m here now!” Yurika called out raggedly, running as fast as she could over to the group.

“Can you get right to it?” Koutarou asked.

“Mending Agent! Modifier: Effective Area, Large!”

Without even stopping to catch her breath, Yurika incanted a spell meant to temporarily strengthen materials. With this, the failing structure should hold up a little longer. Yurika held her glowing staff up to the wall, and an orange light began flowing into it.

“That should buy us some time!”

“Good job, Yurika! Now, I want you to start off covering Theia and Landlord-san! After that, the rest is up to you!”

“Wha...”

Yurika’s eyes went wide when she heard Koutarou’s orders. The first part she could process; since Theia and Shizuka would be prime targets, they’d need her defensive magic to keep them safe. But as for the second part of Koutarou’s instructions, Yurika was at a loss.

The rest is up to me...?

No one had ever said that to her before. She was always following someone else’s plan—usually Kiriha’s, Theia’s, or Koutarou’s. The only times she’d ever been given clearance to make her own decisions were when everything else had failed or she was alone. But Koutarou had just given her free reign, and that absolutely bewildered her.

“Can you handle that, Yurika?!”

With Harumi gone, Koutarou couldn’t bring the full power of Signaltin to bear. He knew he was going to need all the help he could get in this fight and that he likely wouldn’t have the time to give orders in the heat of the moment. Theia had serious blind spots while in the oversize Melee Black, so all of his focus would be spent protecting her. He needed Yurika to follow her own judgment.

“I-I can do it! Leave it to me!”

Yurika nodded with determination in her eyes. She was happy that Koutarou had faith in her when he needed her most, and she would never betray his faith. The glowing crest on her forehead was like a promise of that. Thus, Yurika firmly grasped Angel Halo and proudly took her place next to Koutarou.

Ralgwin and his forces broke through the rear gate of the estate not long after Yurika arrived in the backyard. Even bolstered by magic, the wall simply wasn't strong enough to withstand being rammed by a military vehicle. It pried open the gate enough to create a hole that allowed infantrymen and weapons to make it inside the mansion grounds.

In total, Ralgwin's strike force consisted of 32 soldiers and two supporting mobile weapons. They'd started with a full platoon of forty men, but Sanae's bombardment on the hill had knocked out four men. Four more then stayed behind to carry away their unconscious comrades. Ralgwin had expected this much, however, and pressed his charge.

Meeting his forces at the back gate were Koutarou, Theia, Shizuka, Yurika, and eight of Kouma's personal guards. The enemy outnumbered them almost three to one, but it was hard to say they were outmatched considering their individual abilities. Ralgwin's men were armed with military-grade gear, however, meaning each one of them rivaled Theia in terms of sheer firepower. Koutarou and company would have to keep their guard up.

"Greetings, Lord Layous Fatra Veltlion. I am Ralgwin Vester Vandarion of the Vandarion family. It's truly a pleasure to meet you."

To everyone's surprise, Ralgwin was personally leading the attack. He was known for his caution and intellect, so it was hard to believe he was putting himself on the front line.

"Ralgwin... I never dreamed you'd show up yourself."

"I thought it was high time you and I meet. I owe a debt to my uncle, you see."

In other words, Ralgwin was here for vengeance. Vandarion was ultimately consumed by chaos, but it was Koutarou who'd driven him to such a fate. As such, Ralgwin didn't just want him dead. No, it wouldn't do for Koutarou to be killed by some faceless assassin... Ralgwin wanted him to know who took his life

and why.

“I have no intention of dying here, Ralgwin. I have a duty to fulfill and my own debts to repay.”

There, Koutarou drew Signaltin from its sheath at his waist. He looked far more serious than usual. When he wore his brilliant blue armor and wielded his silver sword, he needed to stand proud as a model knight... for the girls, and for all of the comrades he'd fought alongside two thousand years ago.

“I suppose your history *is* what makes you the legend you are... But it's quite a pain for anyone trying to extinguish you.”

With that, Ralgwin readied his rifle. He hailed from a family of knights himself, but he had no intention of crossing swords with Koutarou. He knew that he wouldn't win, and he wasn't the type to hold his pride over his life. He wanted revenge at all costs.

“Then I assume you showing yourself means you're convinced you can win...”

Koutarou found that part the most unsettling. Considering Ralgwin's behavior before now, it was hard to imagine him making such a move if he didn't wholeheartedly believe in his odds of success. If he was daring enough to step out on the front line, he *must* have some sort of plan.

“But of course. I can't afford to waste resources on fruitless attacks.”

“So this discussion is just a prelude, huh?”

Koutarou suddenly swung Signaltin in his right hand without any warning.

Wham!

When he did, something to his left went flying—it was an assassin who'd crept close with thermal optic camouflage while Koutarou and Ralgwin were talking. And that first strike was like the starting pistol to the fight.

“Begin the attack!”

Ralgwin immediately cut short his conversation with Koutarou and ordered his subordinates to attack. All thirty-some men, Ralgwin included, sprang into action at once. Some set up behind whatever cover was available, some advanced alongside the heavily armored mobile weapons, and so on. Ralgwin

himself took cover and opened fire with his rifle.

He shouldn't have been able to detect the assassin through their camouflage, but he cut him down the moment he was in range. He can also react to gunfire at incredible speeds... The Blue Knight truly must be able to see something we can't. It's not sound or electromagnetic waves, though... Does he possess technology here from the underground, or something else?

Ralgwin wasn't just commanding and fighting, but also strategically observing how Koutarou reacted to various attacks.

"Distribute your fire! Target the Blue Knight's allies too!"

Attacking Koutarou directly didn't seem to be very effective; in fact, it seemed to be just what Koutarou wanted. So instead, Ralgwin decided to simply keep Koutarou in check while they targeted the girls. They could pick them off one by one that way, then converge on Koutarou and overwhelm him. Ralgwin wanted to thin Koutarou's inner circle anyway, so this was as good a chance as any.

"Koutarou, the enemy's pushing!"

"These little...!"

Ralgwin's change of plans effectively tied Koutarou's hands. Theia was using Melee Black to corner the enemy, but its bulky frame left her with several blind spots. If anyone got around her or tactically targeted the joints of the suit, she would be in trouble. And while Kouma's guards were strong, there were only a few of them. They were vastly outnumbered by Ralgwin's men and could easily be overrun. That meant Koutarou had to keep an eye on both them and Theia at the same time, which kept him entirely on the defensive.

The Blue Knight's greatest weakness is the simple fact that he's the Blue Knight...

When Ralgwin realized the tides were turning in his favor, he smiled. A thorough analysis had revealed several of Koutarou's weaknesses, and Ralgwin was intent to exploit those to his advantage.

Bang, bang!

"Tch!"

While Koutarou was occupied defending Theia and Kouma's guards, he had trouble defending himself from enemy fire. He would dodge attacks that came directly for him, but he stood in the way of fire that came for his allies. That meant Ralgwin and his men were reliably able to hit Koutarou by aiming for Theia and the others instead. Thus in Ralgwin's eyes, Koutarou's unwillingness to abandon his friends was a weakness.

"Satomi-kun, Theia-chan! Are you guys okay?!" Shizuka called out.

"I-I'm coming!" Yurika called in turn.

They were in a similarly sticky situation. Shizuka's go-to strategy was capitalizing on her supernatural strength and defensive power; she would jump straight into enemy lines and scatter their formation. An assassin had come for her right at the start of the fight, however, which threw off the timing for her opening move. By the time she'd taken care of the assassin, the enemy had already begun their offensive. They then concentrated their fire on Yurika, leaving Shizuka no choice but to cover for the magical girl. That kept her on the defensive just like Koutarou, though Ralgwin and his men seemed largely focused on Koutarou and Theia. That gave them a little bit of leeway, and they used that to lend a hand whenever they could.

"We're fine!" Koutarou shouted back to the girls. "But Yurika has to attack for us to win this!"

"B-But...!" she stammered.

"If this continues, we'll lose simply because we're outmanned! *Someone* needs to go on the offensive!"

It was an undeniable fact that Koutarou and the girls were seriously outnumbered. And with the enemy as heavily armed as Theia, they would lose in a pure firefight. They needed something to turn the tables. And since Shizuka had her hands full protecting her, Yurika would have to do the trick.

"He's right, Yurika-chan! Now's the time to show us your stuff! Fight like a magical girl!"

"Fight like a magical girl...? O-Okay, I'll give it a shot!"

Yurika was uneasy; normally she followed someone else's lead in combat. But

Shizuka's encouragement reminded her of her heroes: the magical girls she watched on TV and, of course, Nana. So when she asked herself what Nana would do in a situation like this, the answer was clear. Nana never cowered before an enemy, no matter how great. In spite of her small figure, she always stood tall.

"I am the princess of love and courage, Magical Girl Rainbow Yurika! I will protect the peace of this world!"

With that bold declaration, Yurika changed course and fled away from Koutarou and the crowd of enemies. She wasn't the fighter Nana was, but she had her own way of doing things. And if she could stand tall like Rainbow Nana, that was all she wanted. Thus, with that wish, she firmly grasped her staff with both hands.

When the girl in the flashiest outfit took off running, the soldiers firing at her temporarily lost sight of her. Not because she was that fast, of course. She simply fled their scopes for a moment. The trained soldiers kept their cool, however, and zeroed in on her again. Picking her out of a crowd was easy thanks to her bright pink outfit. But just before the soldiers could pull their triggers again... a grenade rolled up to her feet.

Kaboom!

The ground shook from the loud explosion, and then the girl was gone. All that remained was a crater and a billowing dust cloud where she'd been standing.

"Idiot! What did you think you'd get away with in that outfit? All right, men, let's fall back some!"

The squad leader determined that the girl was dead and prepared to put some distance between their unit and their remaining target—a close combat expert. She was no longer protecting the girl in the flashy outfit, so she would undoubtedly go on the offensive now. The squad leader figured they could use the dust cloud from the grenade to retreat a ways... but something was strange. Several of his subordinates ignored his order and stood in place.

"I repeat: fall back!"

It was easy enough to miss an order in the chaos and noise of the battlefield. There were explosions and countless other distractions, so a good commander made sure their men stayed on task. The squad leader thus repeated his order to the team...

“...”

But some of his men still showed no reaction. Multiple soldiers missing orders twice in a row was odd, no matter how he looked at it. The squad leader couldn't shake the bad feeling he was getting as he addressed his men a third time.

“What are you—”

Whud!

There, the frozen soldiers suddenly collapsed to the ground like marionettes with cut strings.

“You men over there! Carry them away!”

“Understood!”

This squad leader wasn't the type to leave men behind. He sent a soldier apiece to cart away his fallen subordinates, but his plan backfired...

Whud!

“What?!”

For when the soldiers reached their collapsed comrades, they too collapsed on the spot. With this, the squad leader finally realized what was happening.

“No one move or you'll collapse just like them! We're under some kind of attack!”

More soldiers were moving to help their unconscious allies, but the squad leader quickly stopped them. He then tried to parse the situation in his head.

They just collapsed all of a sudden... What happened? There was nothing but that one grenade and then a dust cloud. Wait, that grenade... Who threw it in the first place?!

The squad leader's eyes went wide as he stared into the persisting dust cloud.

Without any wind, it wasn't unusual for one to linger like this... but something was still strange about it.

"Don't breathe it in! That cloud's some kind of gas!"

In fact, the entire situation was strange. Since grenades were explosives that risked friendly fire, they were usually only thrown on the commander's orders. At the very least, advance warning was given before they were released.

But the squad leader had never called for one and no one had ever reported one. Where had the grenade at the girl's feet come from, then? Was it just a hologram? A diversion to disguise a drone spewing poison gas in the middle of the apparent dust cloud? The squad leader shuddered at the thought. He'd heard from Ralgwin that one of the Blue Knight's allies used holograms in such devious ways. Vandarion himself had fallen for similar ploys.

"Don't let appearances fool you! There's more to that girl than meets the eye!"

The squad leader couldn't deny he'd been duped. He was completely taken in by the girl's ridiculous outfit and the fake grenade. He'd let his guard down and lost men because of it. He grit his teeth bitterly when he realized he'd been fooled by a young girl, but his misfortune was far from over.

"Sir, the cloud is moving!"

Perhaps because the squad leader had now seen through it, the cloud began whirling and started moving toward the soldiers as if it had a mind of its own. He signaled for his subordinates to get away as he fell back himself.

"Don't breathe in that smoke! If you do—"

Suddenly, the squad leader's vision went black.

What? I didn't breathe in any of the smoke, so why...?

He'd figured out the enemy's trick and kept his distance from the cloud in question, so he couldn't understand what had happened.

"Don't worry. The gas will only knock you out for a while," said the girl in the flashy outfit as she emerged from the cloud.

When the squad leader saw her, he understood everything.

The actual gas was colorless, and that cloud was just a hologram...

Her flashy outfit, the explosion, and the cloud of dust were all diversions. She pretended she'd been killed by the grenade and then hid within the cloud while unleashing an invisible gas. The moment the squad leader assumed she was dead, it was already too late for him.

"Y'know, Yurika-chan, I've actually been thinking that you're probably the scariest member of our group..."

The other girl dealt with the soldiers who'd made it through the gas. The squad leader couldn't help remarking what an incredible strategy it really was—his last thought before he lost consciousness from the gas.

"I-I won using poison again..."

That was the only problem. You see, this flashy girl didn't want to be known as a chemical warfare expert.

After Yurika and Shizuka took out the squad attacking them, the tides of battle began to turn. The two girls then moved to flank the squad Ralgwin was personally commanding.

"Don't you think it's time you fall back like usual?" Koutarou called out.

"I don't think you're in much of a position to talk," responded Ralgwin.

Koutarou was now bruised and bloody. He'd been boldly defending his allies, and as Ralgwin pointed out, he'd taken quite a beating in the process. Theia and Kouma's guards weren't much better off at this point, either. Everyone was worse for wear, but none of them were willing to give up the fight.

"We're right where we want to be, Ralgwin! We've been waiting for this moment!" Theia declared with a fearless smile.

Staying on the defensive had actually been part of their plan. Since they were terribly outnumbered, Koutarou and Theia were holding out while Shizuka and Yurika whittled down the enemy forces. And now that they were on the scene, it was finally time to go on the offensive. As impatient as she was, the long wait had been brutal for Theia. She was chomping at the bit, primed to cut loose—

and now she had Koutarou's permission.

"Go wild, Theia."

"Oh, I will. Princess Theiamillis moving out! Follow me, my knight!"

Theia rushed forward while taking a big swing, and Melee Black copied the gesture perfectly.

Wa-bam!

Melee Black's giant fist blew away several enemy soldiers, as well as the cover they were hiding behind. A single punch from a five-meter giant was a lethal weapon in itself. The sheer force behind its momentous blows was enough to knock out anyone unlucky enough to be on the receiving end.

"Talk about powerful..."

"Heh. Incredible, aren't I?"

"I wasn't praising *you*."

Just a few moments ago, a sweeping charge attack would have been unthinkable. They could hardly move at all when they were on the defensive. Theia was such a massive target that it had taken everything Koutarou had to protect her. But now that the enemy's fire had been stemmed, Theia was emboldened.

Ralgwin, however, had no intention of letting her mow him down.

"Their reinforcements from the right have the princess on the move... Are you still not ready, Fasta?"

"The calibration is coming along, but there's still a 5 percent margin of error."

"That's good enough! Begin!"

"Understood!"

If he could assassinate even one member of Forthorthe's premier band of knights—the Blue Knight's personal retinue—Ralgwin was sure the battle would turn in his favor. Opportunities for surprise attacks like this were rare, so he wanted to make the most of the occasion by eliminating an emotional pillar of the team or an information specialist.

“Veltlion, I’m picking up high energy reactions from the hill!” Clan called in over the comms.

“Now of all times?!” Koutarou shouted.

He felled the man he was currently fighting and then used his armor’s display to zoom in on the hill. The footage appeared in his peripheral vision so as not to obscure his line of sight in combat. He had GoL bombard the enemies trying to flank Theia as he scrutinized the feed.

“Those are some big cannons, Clan!”

“I see them! They’re siege weapons meant for attacking fortresses!”

The high energy reactions Clan was detecting were coming from artillery charging up to fire. Said artillery consisted of movable beam cannons that could be floated through the air for ease of transport when they weren’t in use. They were then lowered to the ground when firing for stability and accuracy. They were the largest variety of cannon used by Forthorthian infantry—and there were currently four of them trained on Koutarou and company.

“Kiriha-san, can’t we blow those away?!” Koutarou asked over the comms.

“They’re out of range for ordinary spiritual energy beam cannons and I’ve already sent Sanae your way.”

The four cannons were positioned near the top of the hill over a kilometer away—too far for even the defensive spiritual energy cannons to hit. Sanae would have been able to extend their range, but she was en route to the main battlefield for backup.

“What about you, Clan?! Any ideas?!” Koutarou asked desperately.

“All we can do now is set the spiritual energy fields to max and— Lock on detected!” Clan shouted, cutting herself off.

“What are they aiming at?!”

“You! All four of them are aiming at you!”

“Damn it!”

The sudden long-range attack caught Koutarou and company by surprise. The

best they'd be able to manage by way of defenses was an emergency deployment of the spiritual energy barrier around the mansion, but that likely wouldn't be enough given the size of the cannons. That meant all Koutarou could do now was try to move away from everyone else.

"All forces, fall back to the safe area marked on the map!" Ralgwin ordered.

"Cannons fully charged! Ready to fire, sir!" Fasta reported.

"We'll be out of luck if this doesn't work! Do it, Fasta!"

"Firing!"

Boosh!

The four cannons opened fire virtually at the exact same time. They shot beams several dozen centimeters in diameter, and they'd been fired in tandem to make sure their target couldn't get away.

I can't dodge that...!

Koutarou knew instantly that he was in trouble. He could sense the trajectory of the beams Fasta shot, and he could see no way to escape it in time. That was the true nefarious nature of this attack—Ralgwin had studied Koutarou's reaction times, his speed, and various other data so that he could corner him.

And the plan he'd come up with to defeat Koutarou for certain was the tandem use of several beam cannons. By diverging their points of impacts slightly, he could cover a wide area with just one attack. Elexis had come to a similar conclusion, but had never been able to employ the strategy for fear of collateral damage.

Ralgwin had no such reservations here, but there was still a point of concern. Due to the sheer size of the cannons, they needed to be calibrated carefully. Fasta had overseen the process herself, yet the best she could say was, "It should hit, but it might not." Those words troubled Ralgwin, but he ultimately decided there simply was no surefire way to kill a legend. Moreover, there was no time to hesitate now. He had to fire.

Vrummm!

The four beams moved almost in parallel. They were spread out in such a way

that they covered a diameter of roughly two meters. Ralgwin knew Koutarou could react to bullets like he had during the sniping incident, but beams moved frighteningly faster. It would be near impossible for Koutarou to escape their effective range in time. Unexpectedly, however, the beams never even reached him...

“Curses! Get in there, Cradle!” Clan cried.

“As you wish,” her AI responded.

Kerboom!

On Clan’s orders, the Cradle warped directly into the line of fire. It ate all four beams in a grand explosion that destroyed its main flight capabilities, sending it crashing into the ground. But thanks to its sacrifice, Koutarou was spared.

“Tch, the princess’s ship!”

Ralgwin unhappily clicked his tongue at this development, but quickly regained his focus. This battle wasn’t over yet.

“Thanks, Clan!”

“Don’t let your guard down! The cannons are recharging as we speak!”

“What?!”

Koutarou wasn’t out of the woods. In another ten seconds or so, another barrage would come... and Clan didn’t have a second ship on hand to take the shot this time. The Cradle would take longer than that to recharge, too. Koutarou could use the precious few seconds he had to hide, but it was likely whatever cover he took would simply be blown away right along with him. And with the group split up, he couldn’t even rally the girls to bolster his defenses. He was right in the middle of Ralgwin’s trap.

In that case, I’ll just have to get close enough to Ralgwin before he can fire... Or maybe I could use magic to hide?

Koutarou desperately racked his brain for a plan. Ralgwin was currently falling back, meaning it would be hard to catch up with him in time. He could use Signaltin to negate his heat and electromagnetic signatures and make himself undetectable... but could he do all that with what time he had left? He gripped

his sword, ready to try... but that was when something strange happened.

Yurika, of all people, had an idea.

“Wait, please! I’ll go! Shizuka-san, can you lend me your mana?!”

“I don’t know what you’re up to, but go for it! Let her have it, Uncle!”

She didn’t explain herself, but Shizuka didn’t bat an eye. If there wasn’t time for explanations, there wasn’t time for hesitation. She would much rather weigh a couple hundred kilograms than lose Koutarou.

“Understood!”

When Alunaya willed it, vast amounts of mana began pouring into Yurika through the sword crest on her forehead. The Fire Dragon Emperor’s incredible stores of magic replenished her mana and then some in the blink of an eye.

“Recall Precast Teleport!”

Yurika always had a spell up her sleeve so long as she had enough mana to cast it. By magically jumping through spacetime, she could blink from one place to another—and she used that now to warp herself directly to the cannons. She then moved right into another spell

“Rotting Swamp! Modifier: Effective Area, Large!”

This one converted a section of ground into foul swampland. It was a powerful spell meant to sink a target and decompose them, but Yurika had another goal in mind here.

“Charging complete!” Fasta reported.

“Open fire! Don’t give them any quarter!” Ralgwin ordered.

“Understood! Firing— Kyaaaah!”

As Fasta went to pull the trigger, the gunner’s seat lurched sideways. She didn’t know what was happening and instinctively moved to brace herself.

“What was that?! What’s going on?!” Ralgwin demanded.

“I don’t know. The gunner’s seat suddenly moved...” Fasta explained in disbelief.

“It moved?!”

Only Yurika was any the wiser. The large siege cannons could only fire accurately when they were docked on solid, level ground. So what happened when the earth underneath them suddenly transformed into a bog? Moreover, this was no ordinary bog. The unprotected parts of the cannons immediately began melting away. “Rotting Swamp” was normally used against people, but it turned out to be equally effective against large equipment.

“Fasta, get away from there right now! I don’t know what happened, but all four cannons have tipped over! Further attack won’t be possible like this!” Ralgwin informed her.

“Understood!” she complied.

“We’re retreating! Rendezvous at point F!”

“Roger!”

With his trump card taken out of commission, Ralgwin accepted defeat and made the call to withdraw. His forces had already moved back in preparation for the beam attack. As for Yurika, she was completely out of mana now and could only watch as Fasta retreated too. But nevertheless, the day was won. Koutarou and company had managed to survive Ralgwin’s ambush.



After the failed offensive at the Kasumi estate, Ralgwin returned to his base. His mood, however, wasn't as sour as one might expect after such a defeat. There seemed to be no strategic victory here either, so Fasta couldn't understand it.

"You look perplexed, Fasta," Ralgwin remarked.

"If I'm being honest, I don't understand why you seem so pleased, Ralgwin-sama. This is nothing like before."

"Oh?" Ralgwin hummed, eyeing her curiously. As far as he was concerned, the answer was obvious. "Did I not tell you?"

"About?"

"Our attack on the Blue Knight was actually part of a diversion."

"A diversion? For what?"

"Extracting engineers from the underground. Everything else we did down there was simply to keep eyes off the real operation."

Through a company on the surface, Ralgwin had made contact with the People of the Earth—and more than just the radical faction. Ralgwin had actually sought out the surviving relatives of the long-gone dismantlement faction. Most of them continued their lines of work as engineers, and Ralgwin's true goal was taking them hostage. Lurking in the underground for such a nefarious purpose, however, was bound to catch the conservative faction's attention.

So to disguise his true objective, Ralgwin had intentionally made a scene of contacting the radical faction. He was surprised that Raiga himself had been the one to blow the whistle, but once everyone knew that Vandarion's faction was in touch with the radical faction, they all assumed that an alliance was their purpose underground. Thus Ralgwin was able to kidnap several engineers while the conservative faction was distracted. Splitting up Koutarou's group, the assault on the Kasumi estate, and everything else were simply secondary objectives and distractions. In other words, Ralgwin had accomplished exactly what he'd set out to do and had no qualms about cutting his losses otherwise.

“This is the first I’ve heard of the extraction...”

“Apologies. I’d meant to tell you. Anyway, the kidnappings were a success and we managed to make off with more than we anticipated.”

“Do you mean to say you now have your hands on military grade spiritual energy technology?”

“Yes, and it’s performing wonderfully. It concealed our entire platoon.”

In addition to making off with engineers, Ralgwin’s men had grabbed some of the cutting-edge technology they were working on. It would take time to force the engineers to make weapons and other devices, but the stolen technology could be used right away. It was an excellent prize.

“So everything is proceeding...”

“Yes. It seemed so out of reach at first, but it’s all gradually coming together. This technology alone will be a great boon in slaying the Blue Knight.”

Ralgwin had been prepared to spend years acquiring the technology. Solving the mystery behind the Blue Knight’s fantastical powers seemed like a pipe dream, but in just a few months, they’d already discovered the first piece of the puzzle. He had no idea how many more pieces there were, but as far as he was concerned, things were looking up.

Yurika had won a great victory in the battle at the Kasumi estate, but she was in a terrible mood when the group returned to room 106. The reason? Another one of Koutarou’s slips of the tongue.

“How could you say something so awful, Satomi-san?!” she cried.

“I’m sorry. Everyone was so on edge. I just thought I could lighten the mood a little with a joke,” he apologized.

“There are some things you can’t joke about, no matter the reason!”

“What?” Sanae interjected. “He didn’t say anything wrong. You’re a dirty girl who dragged our enemy down into a filthy swamp to win.”

“Sanae-chaaan!”

Koutarou hadn't meant anything by it, but proclaimed after Yurika's victory: "As expected of such a dirty girl." The other girls burst out laughing when they heard him say it, immediately dispelling the tension of the battle. All in all, it really did lighten the mood, but Yurika was still furious.

"I'm not dirty! I prefer wholesome romances!"

"I know, I know. You may love your swamps and poison, but you don't actually have a dirty bone in your body."

"Do you *really* feel that way, Satomi-san?"

Yurika stared at Koutarou dubiously. After what he'd said, she couldn't help being skeptical.

"I really do. In fact, the notion that you've ever had a dirty thought in your mind is near laughable."

"..."

"Hey, Yurika! You're thinking something dirty right now, aren't you?!"

"A-Am not!"

Yurika rapidly shook her head. She was desperate to deny it, lest anyone get the wrong idea.

"I understand how you feel, Nijino Yurika, but you accomplished a splendid victory. Such feats make quite an impression, so I'm afraid you'll simply have to bear with it," Kiriha said with a gentle smile and took a sip of tea.

She then cast a glance over to the clock on the wall. It was almost midnight.

"She sure is late, isn't she? I hope all's well..." Harumi commented, picking up on Kiriha's unspoken thoughts.

Koutarou and the others were actually awaiting one of their own, and her return would determine the ultimate success or failure of their trip underground. Regardless of the news she was bringing, however, the Corona House crew would have happily waited up all night for her. She was that precious to them. Needless to say, then, they all turned toward the front door when it opened...

“I’m back,” called Maki softly.

The tense atmosphere in the apartment relaxed when she arrived, but she seemed puzzled as to why.

“Huh? What’s the matter everyone?” she asked as she stepped into the inner room.

In truth, it hadn’t been all that long since Maki found her home here at Corona House. She still didn’t understand the full nuance of family, and it never dawned on her that everyone had been so concerned about her in her absence.

No one needed to explain that to her, however. It was something she would eventually come to understand on her own. So instead, Koutarou pushed the conversation in a different direction and the girls all followed his lead.

“Actually, Aika-san, we couldn’t decide whether or not we should eat without you. But here you are, so let’s get to it,” he said.

“Yes, let’s eat! I vote that we eat!” Sanae cheered.

“Agreed! I’m starving!” Yurika seconded.

“I’m running on empty myself,” Theia commented.

“Ugh, but my weight... Nah, I’ll start my diet tomorrow!” Shizuka rallied.

“I think I’ll enjoy a meal... I’m strangely in the mood for it,” Kiriha added.

“I have something of an appetite myself. Perhaps it’s because I’ve gotten healthier,” Harumi observed.

“That’s a good sign. I recommend you try eating all kinds of things,” Clan encouraged.

“You should be eating right too, you know?” chimed in Koutarou.

“What about you, Maki-san?” asked Ruth.

“I... I’ll eat too. I suddenly feel hungry now that I’m home,” she replied.

Maki, in time, was gradually coming to accept her new family. It wouldn’t be long now before she felt right at home all the time.

“By the way, Maki,” Kiriha called, “how did it go?”

She could tell just by looking, but she felt the need to ask anyway. Since this concerned the People of the Earth's future, Kiriha wanted to hear it from Maki's lips directly.

"It was a success. I found what I believe is the secret base being used by the remnants of Vandarion's faction," Maki said with a triumphant smile as she sat down at a cushion at the tea table—her cushion.

"I see... So our gamble paid off..." Kiriha said with a sigh of relief, her expression brightening.

For the Corona House crew, their real objective was locating Ralgwin's base. When Kiriha first heard from Raiga that Vandarion's faction had reached out to the radical faction, she couldn't shake a lingering question in the back of her mind: what had driven the ever-cautious Ralgwin to contact the radicals when there was no way to account for Raiga's reaction? He must have had a reason. Was the offer for an alliance just a diversion? Or perhaps a trap to lure in her and the others? Or worse, both? Kiriha wasn't quite able to suss out Ralgwin's true intentions at the time, which was why she'd suspected an attack.

Ralgwin wasn't the kind of man who would overlook an opportunity when it presented itself, and Koutarou and company leaving Corona House would have been a golden one. Kiriha anticipated the attack on the Kasumi estate, though she'd chosen not to fortify it with guards so as not to scare Ralgwin away. She knew Ralgwin wouldn't reveal himself unless the odds were in his favor. That was also why she'd agreed to send Harumi and Ruth off to infiltrate the radical faction's new base.

If Koutarou and company hadn't divided their forces, Ralgwin might not have made a move. Kiriha had a good reason for trying to draw him out, which was why Maki had stayed out of the ensuing fight entirely. Her job was shadowing Ralgwin when he retreated after the fact. He had already gotten his hands on spiritual energy technology, but he was still oblivious to the existence of magic. That made Maki the ideal agent.

That was also why Kiriha had held Maki back from the base infiltration mission. Kiriha wanted to make sure she was in position to go after Ralgwin when he showed up. As long as Maki was ready and waiting for him, Kiriha

knew she'd likely learn what she wanted to know... but that was only if everything went perfectly, which was a gamble.

She couldn't say when or if Ralgwin really would attack, and when he did, they would have to fend him off with the minimal forces and weapons they had on hand at the Kasumi estate. It was a dangerous prospect. They also had to hold out on the defensive until Maki was ready, which wasn't conducive to Shizuka and Theia's fighting style. And lastly, even if everything else went according to plan, there was still a chance Maki might come up emptyhanded.

Fortunately, however, Kiriha's gamble had paid off. The tandem cannon attack was unexpected, but the team nevertheless managed to eke out a win by the skin of their teeth. Yurika had saved everyone, and Maki couldn't let that hard work go to waste. She was determined to find the base and thus returned to room 106 successfully.

"Good work, Aika-san," Koutarou congratulated her.

"It's all because you believed in me, Satomi-kun," she replied.

"And now I know how hard it is to be the one waiting around and hoping..."

"That's how I always feel," Kiriha interjected.

"Yeah, I get that now. Thanks for everything you do, Kiriha-san."

"Heh, hearing you say that makes it all worth it."

"Would it all be worth it for you if we thanked you too, Satomi-kun?" Maki asked.

"Honestly, for me..."

There, Koutarou seemed to trail off. He was whispering so quietly that only Maki, who leaned in close, could hear him.

"Oh my, heehee..."

Her eyes went wide for a moment when she heard what he said, but she couldn't help grinning and giggling. Seeing this, Kiriha waved her over.

"What did Koutarou say?" she asked.

"Satomi-kun said—"

“You don’t have to tell her!”

“—that he’s happy as long as he can see me smile.”

“How selfless, Satomi Koutarou.”

“...Gimme a break...”

Thus exposed, Koutarou turned away bashfully. It was a shame, however, as he missed Kiriha’s radiant smile because of it.

“Koutarou,” Sanae called. “Hey, Koutarou, what are you doing?”

“Nothing. Just thinking,” he replied.

“Then you should help me! We’re talking about whether we should have curry or ramen for our late-night snack.”

“Which do you want?”

“Curry.”

“That’s too bad. I want ramen.”

“Whaaat?! It’s your duty to side with me, isn’t it?”

“I’d prefer curry myself, Higashihongan-san,” piped up Maki.

“Really?! Then screw Koutarou. Come over here, Maki.”

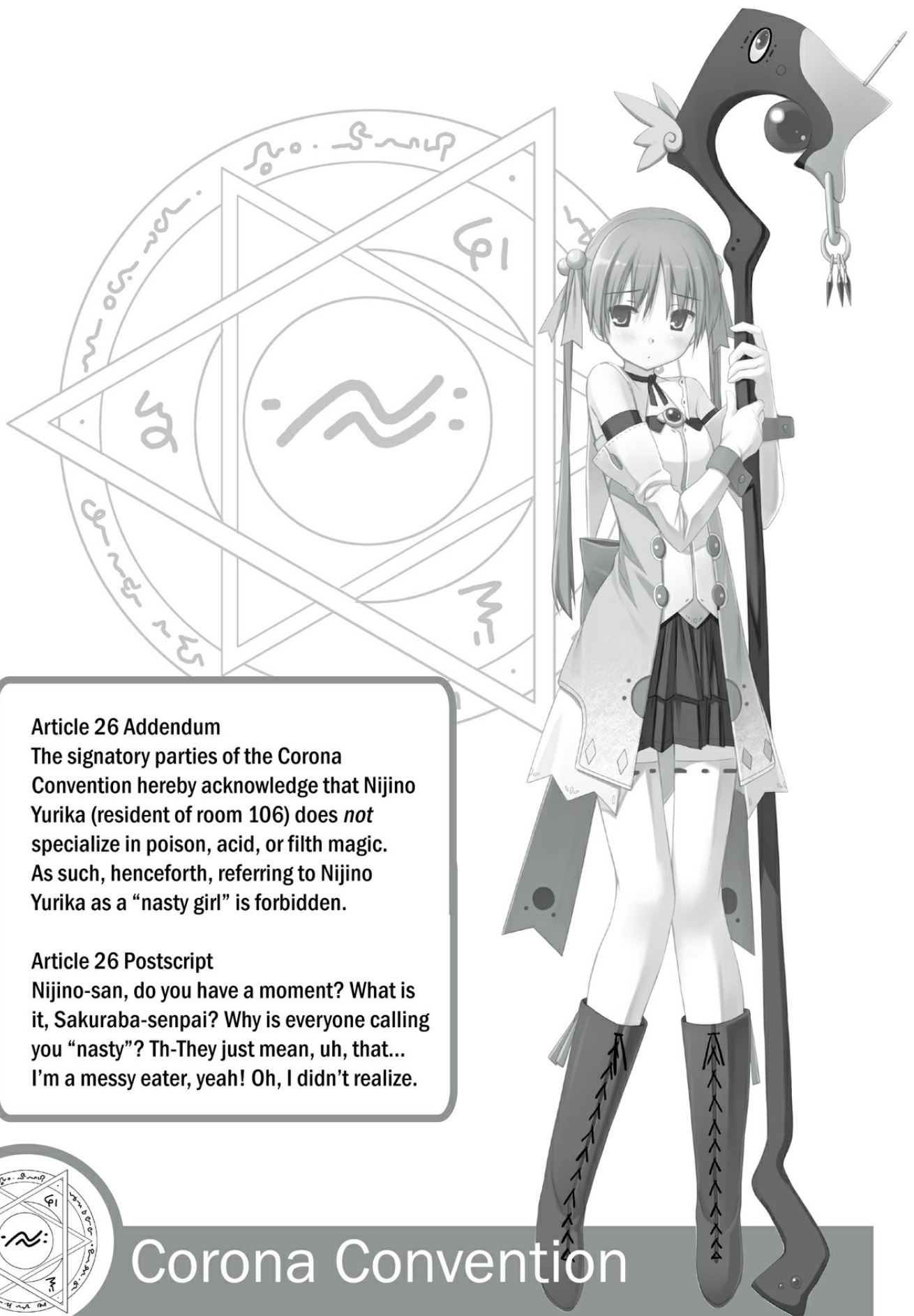
“Wow, I was relieved of that duty pretty quickly,” Koutarou grumbled.

“Don’t worry. I’ll take you instead, Satomi Koutarou.”

“I don’t belong to you guys!”

“Oh, don’t be so coy.”

Thus the night wore on in room 106. The battle was far from over. Koutarou and the girls now needed to plan their next move against Ralgwin, but that could wait until tomorrow. Tonight would be a carefree night of rest together. It was that—their bond as a family—that would get them through the fighting to come.



Article 26 Addendum

The signatory parties of the Corona Convention hereby acknowledge that Nijino Yurika (resident of room 106) does *not* specialize in poison, acid, or filth magic. As such, henceforth, referring to Nijino Yurika as a “nasty girl” is forbidden.

Article 26 Postscript

Nijino-san, do you have a moment? What is it, Sakuraba-senpai? Why is everyone calling you “nasty”? Th-They just mean, uh, that... I’m a messy eater, yeah! Oh, I didn’t realize.

Corona Convention

New! June 9th, 2011

Afterword

This may not come out in March, but happy New Year. Takehaya here. This time, *Invaders of the Rokujouma!?* volume 34 has been safely published. I don't have a lot of space for the afterword this time, so it'll be more compact.

In this volume, we see Ralgwin's forces make a play for the underground's spiritual energy technology. Koutarou and company's objectives are a little different, so in a way, both sides end up winning this time around. Their next battle will probably be the decisive one.

One of the highlights this volume was seeing Harumi get serious. I'm sure there are those of you who have misgivings about her fighting, but as Harumi pointed out, it's only something she falls back on when Koutarou isn't around. We likely won't see it again for a while. Another highlight this time is Yurika's new spell, which is a nice addition to her acid and poison magic. It's effective—and it's nasty. Perhaps it's time for Yurika to give up the ghost and join Darkness Rainbow as her magical girl image plummets like a rock. (She's also earning herself a certain reputation she doesn't like because of it.) Anyway, I hope you enjoyed Rainbow Yurika's moment.

Meanwhile, Theia and Shizuka didn't get much of a chance to shine this time. Theia even brought out some new equipment but didn't get to do much with it. As those of you who have already read the volume will know, it's mostly a defensive battle this time around. Our big attackers didn't have too much to do, but that will change next time around. Look forward to seeing Theia putting her new gear to good use.

Speaking of volume 35, a new princess will also be making her entrance: Nefilforan, who's sent to Earth on Elfaria's orders. Nefilforan is a master of martial arts and is hailed as a genius in battle, although she specializes in close combat rather than marksmanship like Theia. She's more like Shizuka in that sense. Her personal title, Aldousine, means "piercing greatspear." As you might guess, that just so happens to be her weapon of choice.

Now, the next volume will pick up where this one left off with what will likely be an attack on Ralgwin's base. Nefilforan should really get a chance to show her stuff and put her full power on display. Perhaps she and Theia can charge in shoulder to shoulder. Look forward to it!

Incidentally, I have some interesting news about this series. A digital English version started coming out a few years ago, and there was recently a crowdfunding campaign to produce a physical version as well. It set a goal of \$50,000 USD to publish a thousand copies of volumes 1 through 31 in ten omnibus books.

To be honest, I thought achieving that would be difficult considering low overseas popularity. So I was surprised to find out that it more than tripled its original goal and brought in \$165,000 USD. It was a spectacular turnout. I think most of the backers have already read the series digitally already as well, so they're supporting it twice. The editorial department and I are overwhelmed with gratitude.

It seems *Invaders of the Rokujouma!?* is reaching passionate fans all over the world. The series is also published in Taiwanese, Korean, Thai, and Chinese, with a reach in what must be over a dozen countries. I'll work hard to live up to the expectations of all my fans abroad as well as here in Japan. I look forward to your continued support.

I think that just about fills all the space I have, so let's wrap things up here. I would like to thank everyone at the editorial department for their hard work; Poco-san for their illustrations without complaints despite the sudden addition of a mecha; and my fans all around the world.

Let us meet again in the afterword for volume 35.

January, 2020

Takehaya

Bonus Short Stories

Side: Yurika

To most anyone, Yurika appeared to be an utterly carefree creature. But even she got serious from time to time... and now was one of those times.

“Jeez, Yurika. At least *try* to do the work you get from Folsaria instead of just letting it pile up.”

“Paperwork just isn’t what magical girls do!”

Yurika was presently working on a write-up with tears in her eyes. She was the only Rainbow agent who’d gone to Forthorthe, so all the follow-up paperwork had fallen squarely on her shoulders.

“Satomi-san, what happened when we fell from orbit to Planet Alaia again?”

“Well, you cried and screamed the whole way down.”

“I can’t write that in my report!”

“And then you kept crying when we got there because you were afraid of wolves.”

“I need something that *doesn’t* involve me crying!”

Yurika’s memory was terrible, so she was consulting with Koutarou about various events as she worked on her reports. There was so much she didn’t remember that virtually a third of what she wrote down was straight from his mouth. As she faithfully recorded his account, however, she began to grow uneasy.

“Satomi-san... you’re not just pulling my leg because I can’t remember, are you?”

Koutarou was known to joke around on occasion. And it was one thing for him to tease Yurika casually... but if she recorded it in a report, it would be in writing forever.

“What do you think?” he countered.

At that, Yurika fell pensively silent and stared at Koutarou’s face. What *would* he really do at a time like this?

“I don’t think you’d make any silly jokes over something so serious,” she eventually answered with a confident smile.

Koutarou wasn’t the type to kid when Yurika was doing something important—she knew that better than anyone. She also knew he understood just how important her work as a magical girl was to her, so she couldn’t imagine that he was lying or joking around now.

“You’re exactly right. Now, I’ll let you in on something as a little bonus for getting that right.”

“What?”

“Remember how I told you nata de coco is made the other day?”

“By fermenting coconut water, right?”

“That was a lie.”

“Whaaaaaaaat?! But I already told all my friends that!”

Really, Koutarou’s behavior was far more nuanced than Yurika realized. In truth, he would crack jokes like this and fix snacks whenever he could see that she was tired or overworking herself. Whenever she needed a break, you could say.

“I’m just kidding. You really do make it by fermenting coconut water.”

“Which is it?! Auuugh!”

Yurika tossed a cookie in her mouth and sulkily got back to working on her report. Thanks to Koutarou’s pick-me-up, she was going a little faster now. After another two hours or so, she was finally done.

“Yeah, I think this should be good enough.”

Koutarou looked over her work for her. Her handwriting was a little difficult to read, but the content of her reports was solid. If anything, this gave him a much better understanding of the work she was always doing. He wanted to praise

her for it.

“Phew... I can’t believe I managed to finish,” she sighed with a relieved smile.

“Good work, Yurika,” he said, handing the papers back to her.

He didn’t just mean about the reports, either. He was talking about everything she’d done for him and the team in Forthorthe. A lot of her efforts were behind the scenes, so to speak, so he wanted to make sure she got the appreciation she deserved.

“Ooh, yeah. Right there. That feels good.”

“You’re surprisingly stiff, you know?”

“It’s ’cause I’m not used to working like that...”

“That’s your own fault, isn’t it?”

“Heeheehee...”

Koutarou had offered to reward Yurika with a shoulder massage, and she’d happily accepted. The two of them would continue chatting away and joking around with each other for a while yet.

Side: Shizuka

Shizuka’s most prized possession was Corona House itself, as it was a memento of her late parents. So when a certain someone busted a gigantic hole in the wall between rooms 105 and 106, she was understandably enraged. However...

“Sorry for making you help, Satomi-kun.”

“It’s okay. This is my apartment too. Let’s fix it up as soon as possible.”

“Yeah, let’s get to it.”

Shizuka had since come to terms with it. Having the two rooms connected was actually rather convenient, so she and Koutarou were currently in the middle of assessing how to formalize it rather than repair it.

“How do you want it to look? I assume you don’t want any of the insulation

showing.”

“I was thinking of evening it out and installing a rectangular frame. You know, so it looks like a normal doorway.”

“Okay. Then I’ll work on getting the frame ready. I’ll leave evening out the hole to you, Landlord-san.”

“Sounds good.”

Fortunately, the hole didn’t compromise the structural integrity of the wall, so Shizuka was able to work with it. Meanwhile, Koutarou measured the dimensions of the hole and the thickness of the wall in order to fashion a frame out of wood in Clan’s workshop. She had plenty of tools and supplies, so the chore was an easy one.

“How’s this?”

“Lift up the left side a little. It looks tilted.”

“How about now?”

“Yeah, that should do.”

After a few hours of work, Koutarou and Shizuka managed to fit the new frame into the hole. It was clearly a DIY job, but it was still far better than having a gaping hole with exposed insulation in the wall.

“I think that covers it for now. Thanks, Satomi-kun.”

Shizuka looked over their work with folded arms, nodding in satisfaction at a job well done. The landlord was pleased.

“You’re welcome... Oh?”

“What is it, Satomi-kun?”

“Come here, Landlord-san.”

Koutarou beckoned Shizuka, who moved closer with a perplexed expression. While working on evening out the hole in the wall, she’d gotten white plaster powder on her face. She was none the wiser, but Koutarou had just noticed it. He thus reached out and gently wiped it away with a towel. Shizuka couldn’t help grinning at the gesture.

“I think that should do it,” he said when he was done.

He carefully looked over her face to see that he’d gotten all the white powder, and more importantly... that Shizuka was smiling at him.

“Thank you, Satomi-kun. Heehee...”

She ran her fingers across her cheek where Koutarou had just touched her, and her smile subtly changed. It was hard to articulate, but it profoundly struck Koutarou. He wanted to know the meaning behind it.

“Is something wrong, Landlord-san?”

“Nothing at all... I was just thinking that it’s been a long time since someone wiped my face off for me.”

She hadn’t said it directly, but in truth, the last anyone had coddled her like that was when her parents were still alive. She recalled both of them lovingly wiping her face for when she got out of the bath or finished exercising.

“But now you’re doing it for me, Satomi-kun... It just made me happy, heehee. That’s all.”

“I’m sure Sanae, Aika-san, or any of the others would do it for you too.”

“Yeah, I’m sure. But...”

There, Shizuka’s smile changed yet again. This time, however, it clearly turned into a playful grin.

“But what?” Koutarou asked.

“But shouldn’t you be saying you’ll always be around to do it for me?” she asked in turn.

“I’ll always be here to wipe your face for you, Landlord-san,” he replied with a playful grin of his own as he touched the towel to Shizuka’s face once more.





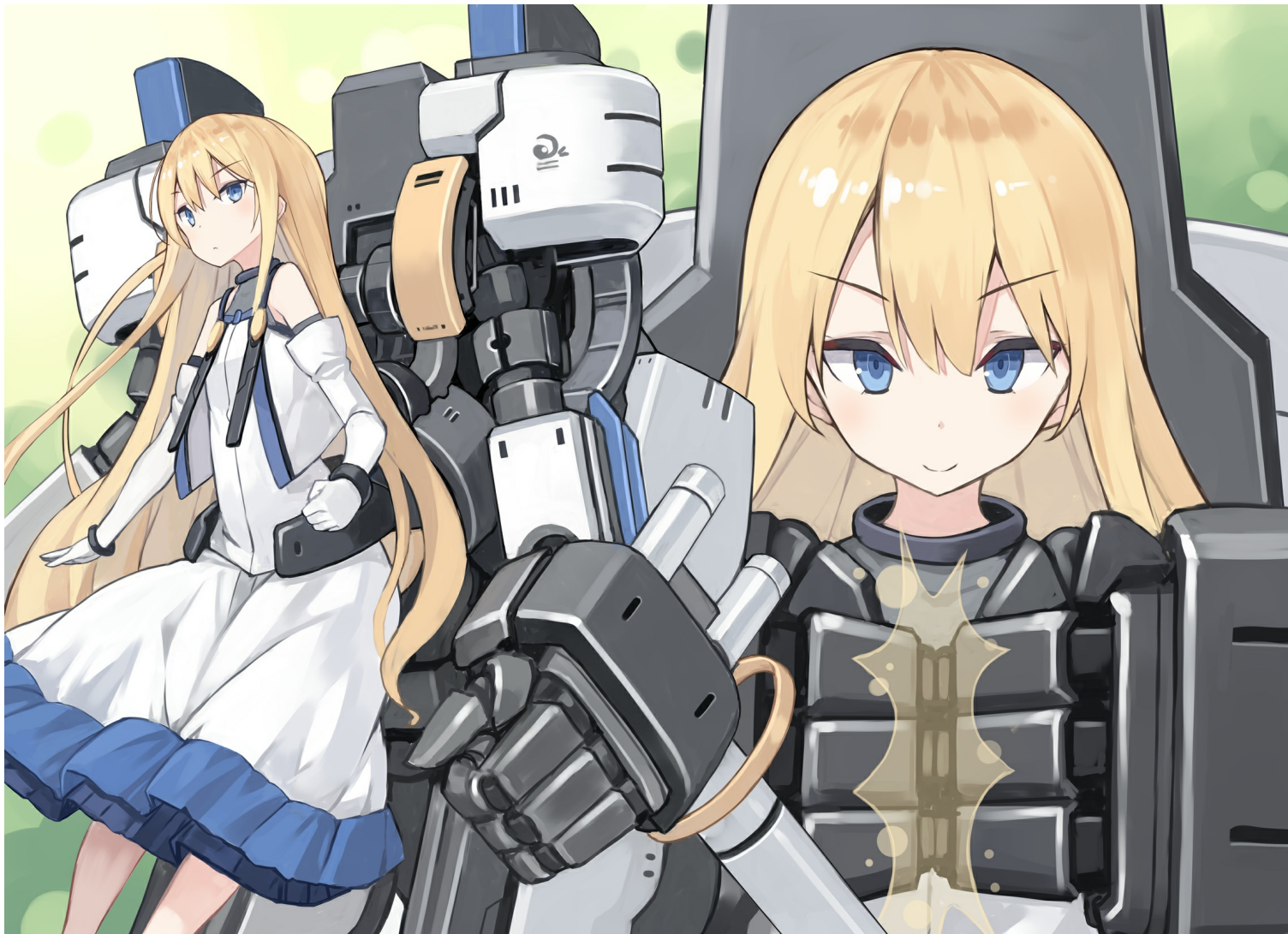




Table of Contents

[Cover](#)

[Color Illustrations](#)

[Factions Map](#)

[Creeping Darkness](#)

[Sunday With a Cat and Ruth](#)

[Unexpected Attack](#)

[Everyone's Intentions](#)

[Kasumi Raiga](#)

[Follow the Sparks](#)

[The Offensive at the Kasumi Estate](#)

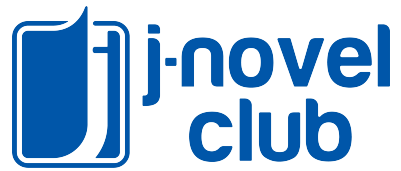
[Afterword](#)

[Bonus Short Stories](#)

[Bonus Textless Illustrations](#)

[About J-Novel Club](#)

[Copyright](#)



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Invaders of the Rokujouma!? Volume 34

by Takehaya

Translated by Warnis Edited by Morgan Dreher

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Ebook edition 1.0: December 2020